Irene Owen Andrews

November -18- 1919

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

http://www.archive.org/details/watermeadsnovel00marsiala

WATERMEADS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE HOUSE OF MERRILEES
EXTON MANOR
THE ELDEST SON
THE SQUIRE'S DAUGHTER
THE HONOUR OF THE CLINTONS
THE GREATEST OF THESE
THE OLD ORDER CHANGETH
WATERMEADS
UPSIDONIA
ABINGTON ABBEY
THE GRAFTONS
RICHARD BALDOCK
THE CLINTONS AND OTHERS

WATERMEADS

A NOVEL

BY

ARCHIBALD MARSHALL

NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1919

Copyright, 1916
By DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY, Inc.

To
PIGO

2066151

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	Grandfather John	1
II	Past and Present	15
III	Some Friends	27
IV	An Evening Drive	42
V	The Eldest Son	55
VI	Holiday	68
VII	At the Cricket Match	83
VIII	Possibilities	96
IX	Olivia	111
X	The Gift of Youth	125
XI	Letters	140
XII	Freda	156
XIII	In the Garden	170
XIV	Will She Do?	183
XV	A Tennis Party	197
XVI	An Interview	213
XVII	Bellamy	228
XVIII	Mr. Blumenthal	239
XIX	An Offer	253
XX	Fred is Disturbed	266

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXI	In Jack's Room	279
XXII	An Engagement	292
XXIII	Lutterbourne Rectory	304
XXIV	Olivia Speaks	318
XXV	Sunday Night and Monday Morning	331
XXVI	Freda Pulls It Off	344
XXVII	Fred Gets On	357
XXVIII	Uncle Mark Visits Watermeads	370
XXIX	Uncle Mark Leaves Watermeads	384
XXX	At Elsie's Wedding	397
XXXI	The Return of Giles	408
XXXII	At Manor Farm	418

WATERMEADS

CHAPTER I

GRANDFATHER JOHN

"Bobby, just go to the door and look out again. He must be coming soon."

Bobby took a proleptic mouthful of bread and jam, and went obediently to the door, which stood wide open to admit the warm air of the June afternoon. He stood on the worn steps of the topmost stair and looked out over the park, through which the drive could be seen winding for nearly a quarter of a mile.

"No sign of him yet," he said, and came back chewing.

The Conway family was assembled round the tea-table in the great hall of Watermeads. They were all there except Fred, the eldest son, from whom a telegram was momentarily expected which would bring him intimately into the circle.

Sydney Conway, Squire of Watermeads, dressed in an old suit of grey flannel, sat with one leg over the arm of an easy chair covered with leather very much worn. A man does not take up such a position at the age of fifty-two unless he is active and spare of body, and younger in mind than in years. It would have been impossible to imagine Mrs. Conway taking up its feminine equivalent, in however light a moment. In a black gown much trimmed she sat upright at the table and did her duty. She was a large ruminative woman,

with an eye fixed on the past. She was addicted to long bursts of silence, but when she spoke she spoke volubly. Elsie and Rose, who were in the early stages of being grown up, had their mother's abundant dark hair and their father's amused alert expression. They were both pretty girls, but Rose was the prettier of the two. They were dressed for tennis, and their rackets were on a carved chest beneath one of the tall windows. Bobby and Billy, in flannel trousers too short for them, and flannel shirts much shrunk in the wash, were not yet of an age to distress themselves about such details. They sat at the round table, earnestly intent upon the business in hand, which appeared to be that of adjusting a larger proportion of plum jam to a lesser proportion of bread than might have been thought possible. Lastly, Penelope, light of her mother's eyes, sat birdlike observant of everything and everybody by her mother's side, and consumed her fair share of whatever was present for consumption.

This was tea poured out of a large silver teapot, with milk and sugar in vessels to match; a cottage loaf, which continuous assaults were fast reducing to nullity; a large plain cake equally in process of eclipse; and a large jar of jam. There was no butter. Butter costs more than jam, made at home from a glut of stone fruit; and money was abundantly scarce at Watermeads.

The hall was stone-floored and pleasantly cool on this hot summer day. The tea-table, round which there would have been room for more than the seven who were seated by it, was in a corner, and left plenty of space for still larger pieces of furniture. The hall,

indeed, looked rather bare; but that was probably because such of the furniture as was not old enough and solid enough to defy neglect was so very shabby. There were a few pieces of armour on the walls, as well as pictures large and small, of which some of the canvases needed repair, and in which cracks in the paint were almost universal. Above the mantelpiece was an unoccupied space, upon which a rectangular mark indicated a picture lately removed.

In spite of its shabbiness and general untidiness, the hall was not unattractive. It had fine proportions, plenty of light, and a nucleus of old and valuable possessions; it had also the air of being constantly lived in. There were books and papers scattered about everywhere; a writing-table furnished with heavy silver was littered all over. There were flowers in big jars on the heavy oak presses and chests, and in smaller vases here and there. A cottage piano, looking presumptuously out of place in its light oak case, straggled meagrely across a corner: a work-basket piled with linen and bunched-up hosiery stood by one of the shabby easy chairs near the great hearth. And there was still room for hats, coats, walking-sticks, umbrellas, golf-clubs, tennis rackets, fishing-rods, and even gardening utensils, which did not keep modestly to the background, but challenged notice from wherever they had been put down by those last using them.

Sydney Conway threw a glance at the empty space above the mantelpiece. "What shall we put up in the place of Grandfather John?" he asked. "We can't leave the wall like that! it looks beastly."

All except Mrs. Conway, whose back was to-

wards the fireplace, fixed their gaze upon the empty space.

"Put up Grandfather George," suggested Elsie. "His red coat would look rather nice."

"That would leave an empty space in the dining-room," said Rose, "and the wall is much worse than this."

"You could put the Holbein into the dining-room. It is the dark wall, and nobody could tell it wasn't a Holbein there."

"Not a bad idea," said their father. "But I still believe it is a Holbein, in spite of the Professor."

"If you moved a picture out of the dining-room you would have to put something there instead of it," said Bobby, with the common sense that distinguished him. "Then you would have to put something else in the place where you got that from. You would spend a week moving pictures and have a bare place somewhere at the end of it."

His father laughed. "Whatever we make of you, Bobby," he said, "you will get on. You foresee everything."

"He doesn't foresee that we should get tired of moving pictures long before a week," said Elsie. "We should have a horrid space somewhere, and sit down and look at it until it was time to sell the next picture."

"Ah, but I hope this is the last," said Sydney Conway genially. "If it fetches a big price today, as I hope it will, it will certainly be the last. Where *is* that telegraph boy? Freddy must have sent the wire long ago. Billy, go and have another look."

But no telegraph boy was yet in sight, and the discussion was resumed.

"I like Elsie's suggestion," said Sydney. "Grandfather George and his red coat will cheer us up, and we want cheering up, now we have lost Grandfather John. When we have filled his gap we shall forget all about him. With all his virtues he was no beauty. I've a good mind to go and tackle it now." He sat up in his chair and looked active. "We needn't bother about filling up the Holbein space in the drawing-room. We never go into the drawing-room."

"I'll help you," said Elsie. "I really believe, when we've finished, we shall we better off than we were before. I never really cottoned to Grandfather John, and if Raeburn did paint him I think he might have been better employed. We shall soon get used to his loss."

Mrs. Conway, who had been sitting unmoved during the discussion, now broke into speech.

"Oh, don't talk like that!" she cried, in vehement reproach. "I'm sure to hear you all speaking as if nothing in the world was sacred makes me shudder. I sometimes wonder whether any of you have got any hearts at all."

"Oh, well, mother," said Sydney, "I don't know that Grandfather John was so particularly sacred. We had no idea that Raeburn painted him, and none of us thought anything of him until the Professor rejected the Holbein, and hit upon him for sacrifice. You yourself have often commented unfavourably upon his strawberry nose, and hinted that he drank more than was good for him. I dare say he did, poor

fellow. We shall be much better off with Grandfather George's red coat than with Grandfather John's red nose."

"That is not the point, Sydney," said Mrs. Conway severely, "and you *know* it is not the point. Drink or no drink—and as to that I reserve my opinion, and cannot but think that the plain signs of it will have a depressing effect upon the price of the picture—your Grandfather John, as you call him, was an ancestor. The beautiful Reynolds has gone; the other two Reynoldses have gone; the great rose-water bowl has gone; the tankards have gone, and I ask myself what will go next. I sit here denuded." She now began to make play with her shapely hands. "I sometimes ask myself what we have got for it all—how much better off we are than before all the treasures of our house began to be dispersed in this careless light-hearted fashion—whether life is worth living at all, and I was not far better off in my girlhood, surrounded by few luxuries, it is true, but with enough and to spare, and no anxiety whatever as to the morrow's joint, or the day's supply of milk and bread."

Her husband, who had listened to this exordium with the air of a connoisseur, enjoying such points as were made in it, and on the look-out for others, now turned to her with an ingratiating smile, and said: "Well, you know, mother, we have managed to support ourselves in comfort, if not in luxury, for some years, and we are all still living at Watermeads. That's something, isn't it? We couldn't have got on at all if we hadn't made up our minds to sell a few things that we can perfectly well do without. It's a bore, of

course, but the less we think about it the happier we shall be. After all, we've got lots of jolly things left."

"What did we get out of the beautiful Sir Joshua?" Mrs. Conway pursued her unbending course. "Seven thousand pounds. And it was sold again last year for eleven."

"Well, that was the fortune of war," said her husband equably. "And as for five thousand pounds out of the seven going in an unlucky speculation, that was the fortune of war too, and it's one of the things that we don't talk about. Besides, those shares may turn up trumps still. You can't call the money lost until the mine closes down altogether. I did it for the best —for you and the children."

Elsie put her hand on his knee. "Darling old Micawber!" she said affectionately. "We don't miss anything; and we're very happy."

"That is not the point, Elsie," said Mrs. Conway. "You are too young to see that we are living all the time on the brink of a precipice. We are like Pontius Pilate fiddling while Rome was burning. One ancestor after the other goes; and——"

"Well, mother darling, after all they're not your ancestors, and we've got on pretty well without them."

"Grandfather Giles sent Freddy to Charterhouse," said Rose.

"And Grandmother Penelope sent him to Cambridge, and rebuilt two farm-houses, besides keeping us going for a year," added her father. "Freddy has had the best of educations, and is now hard at work repairing the family fortunes. Most of the money we

ever got out of our sales has been well spent; and apart from education, we have all kept ourselves alive. We had to be kept alive, hadn't we, mother?"

"You said just now, Elsie," said Mrs. Conway, who had been ruminating, "that the pictures sold were not of my ancestors. I am well aware of that fact, but I hope I may be allowed to take *some* interest in the things that are in my home."

"Oh, yes, mother, of course. I only meant that ancestors *as* ancestors aren't so dreadfully to be regretted."

"Besides, they are doing such a lot for us," said Rose. "We quite hope that Grandfather John is going to send Bobby and Billy to Charterhouse too. I think we have been very ungrateful to him. We have talked about his red nose and not thought anything of him; and all the time he has been waiting and looking at us, quite ready to help us when the time came."

"If my advice had been listened to," said Mrs. Conway, "none of this would have happened. We should still have had all our beautiful and valuable things around us. Here we are, living in a big house, with thousands of acres of land. What is land for? I speak under correction, but I was brought up to believe that it was of some use for providing food for people to eat."

"Quite right, mother," said Sydney," and it is all being farmed. Unfortunately, just at present, it doesn't produce much for *us* to eat. But agriculture is bound to take a turn by and by."

"The park is not being farmed," said Mrs. Conway.

"The park is being grazed. It produces food for Mr. Stanborough's sheep."

"And why grazed? Have I not begged and implored you, Sydney, to use all that valuable land for French gardening?"

"You have, mother."

"Then why has it not been done? I took pencil and paper, worked it all out, and showed you the figures myself. The park covers fifty-four acres. If a waiter near Brighton could make a thousand pounds' profit in one year out of half an acre, as we were assured was being done, then the park would produce no less than one hundred and eight thousand pounds a year if it was made proper use of. Subtract the eight thousand for contingencies, and——"

"Oh, but why do that, mother? Eight thousand pounds is a lot of money."

"I wish to be on the right side and to leave a margin. Subtracting the eight thousand you would have left a hundred thousand pounds a year, unless my arithmetic is at fault; and I for one should consider myself well off with half that income."

"So should I, mother, quite well off. Still, there was that little question of markets, you know; and a few other little questions which seemed to make your scheme, well thought-out as it was, slightly fly-blown. No, we couldn't save ourselves by French gardening, or we would have had a go at it. We've had a go at quite a lot of things, you know. It hasn't been for want of having goes at things that we are not so well off as we should like to be."

Penelope broke silence. "You had a go at Uncle

Mark, didn't you, father, after you had spent all your own money? " she asked in a piping voice.

Bobby and Billy stared at her; Elsie and Rose made motions of despair towards one another. Mrs. Conway awoke out of the beginnings of a sort of cataleptic trance, in which her eyes were fixed upon lost opportunities, and said indignantly: " You should not put such words into the child's mouth, Sydney. I sometimes wonder what you will say next."

Her husband laughed. " I sometimes wonder what Miss Muffet will say next," he said. " Who told you about Uncle Mark, terrible infant? "

" Mother did," replied Penelope ungratefully. " She said that he was very rich, but he had such funny ideas that she was afraid he wasn't going to leave his money to us."

" I did not say funny ideas," said Mrs. Conway. " You must be careful how you speak, Penelope darling. Little girls cannot be expected to understand everything, but I thought you were old enough and sensible enough to be told certain things. Uncle Mark's ideas are the reverse of funny. They are unaccountable, they are wicked, if you like. But they are not funny, and I never said they were."

" Well, I think they *are* rather funny, mother," said Sydney. " Still, I don't despair of Uncle Mark yet. He wouldn't do anything when I asked him, it is true. He said—well, I won't say what he said."

" If you are acting out of consideration to me, Sydney," said Mrs. Conway, " you may spare yourself the trouble. As you have opened up the subject, I should like Penelope to know—and I should like *all* my chil-

dren to know, and they can judge for themselves how far your description of your Uncle Mark's ideas as *funny* is justified—exactly why they have never set eyes on him, although I believe they are his only living relations."

"Oh, don't go into that now, mother," said Elsie. "We have heard it dozens of times."

"You have *not* heard it dozens of times, Elsie," said her mother, "and whatever you *have* heard is probably not the precise truth."

But her husband stopped her. "I don't want it talked about, mother," he said decisively. "Uncle Mark behaved like the old fool he is, in spite of his reputation; and there's an end of it. If he chooses to behave better by and by, well and good; but we don't look forward to occupying dead men's shoes. We'll rub along somehow, and if Grandfather John has fetched his proper value today, why we shall have all we can want for some time to come."

Mrs. Conway subsided into her contemplation of the past, and Elsie said: "What *will* he fetch, Dad? He wasn't in a very good state."

A heavy door leading from the back regions of the house opened with a creak, and a maid came in with a telegram. Sydney Conway sprang up and seized it from her. "At last!" he said, tearing it open.

The maid on her way out lingered to hear the news. She was a stout young girl from the village, and was almost as anxious to know the price that the Raeburn had fetched at Christie's as Sydney Conway himself.

"Two thousand seven hundred," said Sydney, and

looked round him with an expression of satisfaction and disappointment combined.

There was a moment's pause. "It's not so bad," said Elsie.

"I never really expected more," said Rose.

"Well, I don't know that I did either," said Sydney, putting the telegram into his pocket.

The door banged behind the maid.

"Might I be permitted to see Fred's telegram?" enquired Mrs. Conway, in a voice of stately humility.

"That's all it says, mother," said Sydney, handing it to her. "It's all there was to say. Well, there it is! It will run to Charterhouse. Sonnies, Grandfather John has turned up trumps, red nose and all. Three cheers for Grandfather John."

Bobby and Billy, touched by the excitement of the moment, cheered lustily, and were joined by Elsie and Rose. Penelope looked sharply at her mother, on whose face appeared an expression of pained expostulation.

"I wish you would not encourage them to behave in that way, Sydney," she said. "Really the house is like a beer-garden—and Alice coming in in that way with her sleeves rolled up, and not even taking the trouble to hand the telegram on a salver, of which we have *some* left—I sometimes wonder whether we have retained *any* of the habits of gentlefolk."

"Well, mother, we must show our gratitude to Grandfather John. And it *is* jolly to feel that we're on the right side of things again, and Bobby and Billy are to get their chance—now isn't it?"

Mrs. Conway put the telegram down on the table. "On the right side!" she echoed. "And how long are we to remain on the right side? What about the interest on the mortgage? What about the roof? What about Bilson and Puckeridge and Jones, with their acounts?"

"Oh, it will settle most of those, and we don't want to look too far ahead, just when we've got a pot of money. It's ungrateful to Grandfather John, and besides, something is sure to happen before we have come to an end of it. I wonder if it will run to a horse again. That's what I miss more than anything else—not having a horse in the stable."

"Will it run to our allowances?" asked Rose. "Elsie and I are in rags."

"Oh, my dear!" said her father. "You shall have all that and a bit besides. And, mother, you shall have twenty pounds to do what you like with. You haven't had twenty pounds in your purse for years, have you?"

He bent over her and imprinted a sounding kiss on her voluminous cheek.

She was not softened by the caress. "If you would give the *whole* of this money into my keeping, Sydney," she said, "I should not want twenty pounds for myself, or any other sum beyond what would supply me with bare necessities. Penelope *must* have shoes; the child is growing fast, and——"

"I want a new tennis racket, father," piped Penelope. "Elsie and Rose have got them, and I don't see why *I* shouldn't."

"You shall have it, Mother Bunch. You shall *all*

have something that you want. Bobby and Billy, you shall each have a bicycle."

"Then *I* want a bicycle," Penelope amended her request, "and a tennis racket too."

Her mother drew her towards her. "My pet," she said, "you shall not be left out in the cold. If money is going to be thrown away on amusements that is needed for keeping the wolf from the door, mother will see that you share with the rest."

"Of course she'll share with the rest," said Sydney. "Lord, what a relief it is to have something to spend again! I feel ready for anything now."

They rose from their chairs. "Shall we change the pictures now, Dad?" asked Elsie. "I'll go and get the steps."

"I think we'll leave that for the present," said Sydney. "It's a jolly evening. I'm going up to see if I can get a fish in Sandford Hole. Who'll come with me?"

CHAPTER II

PAST AND PRESENT

It was not much in the way of possessions still remaining to him that Sydney Conway did not share equally with his family; but it was understood that Sandford Hole, a wide willow-bordered pool in a secluded corner of the park, and the fat trout that lurked there, were reserved for his rod. Nevertheless Bobby and Billy eagerly accepted his proffered companionship, rather than fish for themselves in other waters. Elsie and Rose would also have accompanied him, had not Mrs. Conway reminded them that they were under contract to pick currants and raspberries for a tart to be consumed that evening. Penelope stayed of choice with her mother. There was something she wanted to learn from her.

Sydney set out at a smart pace, with Bobby and Billy on either side of him, carrying the one a landing-net, the other a fishing basket. Intent on the object of their journey, they yet paused for a moment, when they reached a certain group of trees, to look back upon the house. This was almost a matter of ritual, and no visitor came to Watermeads without being taken to the five beeches and made to admire the house as seen from that point.

It stood, a winged porticoed pile of weathered stone, backed by a heavy mass of foliage, now beautifully

varied by the fresh green of beech and the sombre tints of the deodars and the giant evergreens that grew in the garden. A flight of shallow stone steps, at the top of which was a broad terrace, ran right along the main part of the house and gave it an air of welcome, in which, indeed, both in good times and bad, it had never been lacking. It was said that a hundred carriages had once stood on the gravel square, now almost as green as the park itself, in front of the house. The gardens were behind and on either side; the house faced the park baldly, and nothing but trees and grass could be seen from its front windows, except a glimpse of distant country through a gap. The village was a mile away; but the tower of the church showed amongst the trees, and the thatched roof of the modest vicarage was hard by it. The house had forty bedrooms, all of them furnished, and once, on occasion, occupied; the gardens covered fifteen acres; the stables would have housed a troop of cavalry. But now there were two women servants indoors, and a man and a boy outside.

And yet Sydney Conway's eyes brightened as he looked back on the house in which he had been born and brought up.

"That's your home, sonnies," he said. "Wherever you go and whatever you do when you grow up, you'll never forget that you lived here when you were boys. You couldn't have a jollier place to live in, could you now?"

"No," said Bobby and Billy with one accord. They were quite satisfied with their home, although they would have liked to exchange it for lodgings at the

seaside rather more often than had been possible of late years. That was about all the difference that the pinch of poverty made to them. They had plenty to eat, and the whole beautiful place to play about in, much more exciting as to the overgrown garden than if it had been kept spick and span by a dozen gardeners. They did their lessons at the Vicarage, played cricket with the villagers on the ground in the park, went birds-nesting with the village boys, fished in that small portion of the stream that their father still reserved and occasionally, unknown to him, in the water that was rented from him. They ran with the hounds, and had even scraped up enough money two years before to buy a foal, which they were now breaking in themselves. They got much more fun out of this than if there had been ponies for them in the stables as a matter of course. There was no need to waste commiseration on Bobby and Billy, and their father wasted none. So far, they had been as fortunate as if he had been able to give them all that his father had given him. And now they were to have their chance for the future.

"You *will* work, when you get to school, won't you?" he said as they went on.

"Oh, yes, Dad," said Billy promptly.

Bobby said nothing. He probably would work. He liked work, of any sort, whether with his brains or with his hands, and went at it doggedly until he had finished what he had set out to do. Billy was not so sure in his efforts, but he was quick enough, and the estimable Vicar had kept him at it.

"When I was your age I didn't work," their father

confessed to them. "I went in for having a good time, and now I wish I hadn't. At least, what I wasn't sensible enough to see in those days was that the best possible time a boy could have, or a man either, was by working hard as well as playing hard."

Bobby and Billy had heard this before, and took it dutifully, striding along on their sturdy legs, their pleasant freckled faces marked as yet by no sense of the burdens and responsibilities of life.

It could not be said, indeed, that their father's face was noticeably marked by such signs; but now he looked down at them with a kind of thwarted earnestness.

"Ah, if I could only make you see it!" he cried, twisting his thin muscular hands. "Look here, boys, you've got the whole world before you. You can do what you like with it. If you want to be rich by and by, you can be rich. If you want fame, you can have it. You can have anything you like if you'll only work for it."

"Of course we shall work, father," said Bobby, anxious to calm his emotion, which seemed to be somewhat distressing him, and threatened to come across the evening's enjoyment.

"Yes, dear old boys—I believe you will, both of you. But what I want you to see, if I can only get it into your heads, is how damned lucky you are."

Bobby and Billy did not blench at the epithet, which was in customary use towards them, although they were prohibited from using it themselves.

"You have five years before you, in which you can go straight ahead. No anxiety about what you're

to do!—your work's all mapped out. Jolly work, too—for boys who have sensible tastes, as you have. You'll have other boys now to pit your wits against. Stick to it, and beat 'em. Never let yourselves get slack—not for a day, not for an hour. Every hour will count. You'll have the games too, and you must be just as keen about them as about the work; but not keener—don't make that mistake."

"We shall try to get into the eleven," said Bobby. "You were in it, and you've helped us."

"Of course you'll try to get into the eleven. It was the only thing I did try for, worse luck; and I don't want you to make the same mistakes as I did. You've got a glorious time before you. Lord, how I wish I'd got it all over again! What I want you to see is that you'll have twice as good a time if you take the sixth form, and a scholarship at the end of it, as seriously as you take the eleven. You've got to do both, and you've got to make yourselves just as keen on the one as on the other."

"We'll work hard," said Billy again.

"Oh, well! It's on the knees of the gods," he said, suddenly relinquishing his earnest air. "You've got your chance. With all the mistakes I've made I've seen to that—with Fred, and you too. If you love your old father, as I know you do, you'll work to please him. And after a bit, if you're built that way, you'll see it all, and work because work is the only thing in life that's worth doing. Well, here we are! I wonder if we shall get old Isaac tonight. It would be a good omen if we did, after he has foiled us so often."

Tea was cleared away from the hall by Alice, the maid, to whom Mrs. Conway gave a lesson in deportment and general behaviour as she collected cups and plates on to a tray, not without considerable clatter.

"In a house like this," said Mrs. Conway, who was now seated in the chair by the work-basket, fitting a stocking on to a sort of wooden tennis ball preparatory to darning it, "the natural thing would be for a butler to do the work that you have to do; or a butler and a footman; or even two footmen. Mr. Conway and I once stayed in a house where there were three footmen, as well as—— However, that is not the point. You must take a pride in your work, and do it as well as you can. *Never* come in with your sleeves rolled up, as you did just now; and *never* hand a telegram, or a letter, or anything, except on a salver."

"Well, mum, I'm sure I'm doing my best," said Alice good-humouredly. "But there's such a lot of work to get through that sometimes I don't know whether I'm standing on my 'ead or my 'eels."

"I am quite aware that there is a great deal of work to do," said Mrs. Conway. "Work is a good thing for all of us, and you see that I am working myself, at this very moment. You wouldn't see the mistress of many houses like this darning stockings—from preference. However, that is not the point. You must do your work with system. You will do twice as much with system as without."

"She doesn't want to do twice as much work," said Penelope, from the depths of another shabby easy chair opposite to her mother's. "What she likes do-

ing is to read penny novelettes. I counted fourteen in her bedroom yesterday."

"No keeping nothing from Miss Poke and Pry," said Alice with admirable equability as she went out with the tray.

"You should not talk of the servants in that way when they are present, Penelope," said Mrs. Conway. "It gives them an excuse for being impertinent. I have enough difficulty with them as it is, and my little girl must not add to it. What were you doing in Alice's bedroom?"

"Counting her penny novelettes. Mother, why have none of us ever set eyes on Uncle Mark?"

Mrs. Conway's lip stiffened. "You heard what your father said about that," she replied. "I may have wished that you should all know the facts of the case; but if he thinks differently, so be it. I must keep silence.

"Uncle Mark is a great swell, isn't he?"

"You must not use such words as that, Penelope darling. They are not at all pretty coming from little girls. Uncle Mark was a Cabinet Minister. That is to say, when gentlemen came together in Parliament to make the laws he was one of their leaders. It was a very honourable position, and I am far from saying that he was not competent to fill it, although it is true that he was turned out of his seat in Parliament shortly after father married mother, and has remained out ever since."

"Was it because father married you that Uncle Mark wouldn't have anything more to do with him?"

Mrs. Conway put her work down on her lap. "And

pray who has told you a wicked thing like that?" she asked indignantly. "Really, I sometimes think there are no limits to the things that are said in this house before an innocent child. You are too young, darling, to see how disagreeable it is for mother to have a speech like that made to her. I do not blame you so much as those who put such an idea into your head; but you are old enough now, darling, to be more careful of your words."

Old enough or young enough, Penelope waited with sharp-eyed eagerness for an answer to her question.

"*You* wouldn't think that father could be made happier than by marrying mother, would you, mother's pet?" enquired Mrs. Conway.

"I suppose I shouldn't be here if you and father hadn't been married," said Penelope.

Mrs. Conway, under pretence of blowing her nose, deposited her work in the basket, and under cover of it took up a set of ivory tablets hanging from her waist and wrote on it, while she essayed at the same time to continue the conversation. "You wouldn't like—to have had—shouldn't be here—I mean——"

"Put down what I said first, mother," said Penelope. "You can't talk and write at the same time."

Mrs. Conway, abashed by this speech, dropped her tablets, and took up her work again. "I never can remember to order the methylated," she said, with transparent duplicity.

Penelope persisted in her inquisition. "Did Uncle Mark want father to marry somebody else?"

Mrs. Conway settled herself more comfortably in

her chair. "When father was a young man," she said, "living here at Watermeads with Grandfather Conway, mother was living at the Vicarage with Grandfather Diblee, who was Vicar here, just as Mr. Bonner is now."

"You were a good deal older than Dad, weren't you, mother?"

"Now who told you that? It is not true. We were nearly the same age, but while father was always old for his years mother was generally thought to be younger than she was. I remember very well at our wedding that Lord Bridlington, who was present, as you will see some day when I show you what was written in the newspapers about it—it was a quiet wedding, but there were a good many titled people present, friends of both bride and bridegroom, although Uncle Mark preferred to be absent, and I must say, strange as it may appear, that he was very little missed."

"What did Lord Bridlington say?"

"I cannot tell you that, darling. When you are a little older you will understand better that elderly gentlemen who are looked up to a good deal in the world are permitted to say things that would not be becoming in other people."

"Well, tell me about Uncle Mark. Didn't he adopt father?"

"No. Uncle Mark was the brother of Grandmother Conway, who died when father was a baby. You must always remember, Penelope darling, when you grow older, if there are sometimes things that you cannot quite understand about father, that he

never knew a mother's love. Think what a difference it would make to my little girl if mother had died before she was old enough ever to know her!"

"Tell me about Uncle Mark," said Penelope.

"I am telling you, darling. He used to come here when Grandfather Conway was alive, and I often saw him; for Grandfather Diblee and I were at Watermeads a great deal; it was almost like a second home to me. And I never liked Mr. Drake, as of course we always used to call him then."

"Did he like you?"

"As it turned out afterwards, unaccountably not; though I always treated him respectfully, and without showing that I did not like him. In fact, I was careful to hide my dislike, and took pains to engage him in conversation whenever I had the opportunity."

"Perhaps that was what he didn't like."

"Perhaps it was; there is no telling. You may do all you can to please some people, and you will never please them. But one would have thought that the conversation of a young and modest girl, anxious to improve her mind and to hear the other side in politics—for Uncle Mark was what is called a Liberal, while Grandfather Diblee and I were strong Conservatives—would not have displeased even a President of the Board of Trade! But that is not the point. When Grandfather Conway died, Uncle Mark became father's guardian, as it is called, and until father came of age he lived with him in London, and for some years afterwards, while Watermeads was let. He was secretary to Uncle Mark, who—I will do him that amount of justice—was fond of father, and thought highly of

his abilities, and wished him to enter Parliament, as he had done himself, and to get on."

"Why didn't father?"

"Why didn't father what?"

"Get on."

Mrs. Conway sighed deeply. "We must never blame father for any mistakes he may have made," she said. "His abilities might have carried him far, although he often says himself that in his youth he was more fond of pleasure than of hard work. If he had consented to go on letting Watermeads for a time, and gone on with his work in London, we should most likely not have been in the position we occupy today, living in a big house with not enough money to live as we ought to live. In mother's old home with Grandfather Diblee, simple as it was—— However, that is not the point. We must not complain. Father is head of the family, and it is our duty to bear cheerfully whatever he chooses to prepare for us."

"But I thought Uncle Mark wouldn't let father go on being his secretary if he married you, mother."

Mrs. Conway laid down her work. "I must insist, Penelope, on knowing who has told you these tales," she said. "*Somebody* seems to have taken a delight in filling your poor little head with any story that would reflect discredit on your mother. I say that it is a very wicked thing to do, and if I find it goes any further I shall take strong measures to stop it. Now who was it told you that?"

"You did, mother. Isn't it true?"

"It is true that Uncle Mark behaved in a most reprehensible way throughout. I have sometimes

thought that he could not have been quite in possession of his senses at the time; and perhaps that is the kindest way to look at it. But when did I tell you such a thing as that?"

"Oh, often. But you have never told me what he said, and why he didn't want father to marry you."

"You have been told quite as much as is suitable for a little girl to know. And I will not have you discussing it with the others. Now do you quite understand that, Penelope? Because if you disobey me I shall be very displeased. Facts are put to you in a wrong light, and I should be very sorry to think it, but it looks as if there must be somebody who takes a pleasure in putting them in a way to make them reflect against mother. I do not ask who it is. I would rather not know."

Penelope said she thought she had better go and practise. She played three bars on the schoolroom piano and then went into the garden to find Elsie and Rose.

CHAPTER III

SOME FRIENDS

Elsie and Rose had begun by discussing the very point that Penelope had set herself for the hundredth time to elucidate.

"What *was* it that Uncle Mark said about mother? I'd give anything to know," said Elsie.

"We should have got it out at last, if father hadn't stopped her," said Rose.

"Oh, no, we shouldn't. We should have had the old story all over again. It would have been made quite plain that he made an unholy row about father marrying mother, and the kindest thing to say was that he was unaccountable for his actions."

"I think it is awfully sweet of Dad to want it not to be talked about at all. He quarrelled with Uncle Mark because he was rude about mother, and he has been getting poorer and poorer ever since. But he never brings it up against her."

"It would be rather horrid of him if he did."

Rose reflected. "I'm not so sure," she said. "She brings up everything against *him*. Poor old Micawber! I wish he *could* have a bit of luck."

"If he doesn't, we shan't be able to go on living at Watermeads."

"Oh, *something* will turn up. There's always Uncle Mark in the background. He is as rich as he can be, and father is his only near relation."

"Father hasn't seen him for twenty-five years."

"I know. But that's because he's too proud to take the first step. Oh, I'm sure Uncle Mark must see by this time what a good sort father is; and in the long run he'll make it up with him."

"Elsie laughed. "You're as sanguine as Dad," she said. "I don't think you've much to go on with Uncle Mark—after twenty-five years."

"Well, there's Freddy. Freddy loves Watermeads as much as father does, and all of us. If he makes his fortune on the Stock Exchange, it will be just the same as if Dad had made the money. We shall all go on living here, and we shall live like other people, instead of in the way we do."

"Somehow I don't see Freddy making his fortune on the Stock Exchange. He is just like Dad—not a bit cut out for business."

"Cousin Henry is going to make him a partner. He makes a lot of money, and I suppose Freddy will have half of it when he is a partner. It's awfully lucky for him that Uncle Henry only has girls, and no boy to put into his business. Freddy *is* lucky. He won that Derby Sweepstake. He's awfully sweet too. He'd have given all the money to us, if Dad had let him. I believe that Freddy's good luck will make up for Dad's bad luck."

"If he gets on he may want to get married, and come and live here."

"He couldn't live here if he had to work in London. Besides, he wouldn't want to turn us out."

"Perhaps he will marry an heiress. He is very good looking."

"He might fall in love with someone, and find she was an heiress afterwards. That would be the best thing that could happen."

"Why are we always talking about money?" asked Rose.

"Because we haven't got any. But I'm not sure we don't have as much fun as if we had. You know how bored Hilda Bradley gets; she hates living in the country all the year round. We don't get bored, because we have plenty to do."

"I do get bored sometimes, with making beds and dusting, and lots of things that servants generally do."

Elsie looked at her affectionately. "Poor darling!" she said. "Of course *you* oughtn't to have to do that sort of thing; you're much too pretty."

Rose blushed. "I'm not nearly so pretty as you think I am," she said; and added with a smile: "But I like you to think it all the same."

There was a little story behind this—or the beginnings of one; but the sisters did not talk about it, although they talked about everything else between themselves.

"I should like to do some real work—like boys can," said Rose. "It must be fun, trying hard, and making your way."

Elsie laughed again. "That's what Dad is always talking about," she said. "But he doesn't do much. You wouldn't do much either. Neither of us is any good at the things girls do do, to get on—like music or painting. We're rather clever at house work because we've got to be. But neither of us could make a penny if we tried."

"It isn't a very bright look-out."

"We need not look out, very far. "We're happy enough, living here at Watermeads; and if we're going to get our allowance paid up now, I don't know that we want much more for the present."

"We all make a sort of religion of Watermeads."

"Well, it *is* the nicest place in the world, and we all know it is. We've picked enough now. Let's take these in. Then we can go and meet Dad."

They went with their baskets through the untidy kitchen garden, which provided the house with a large proportion of the food consumed in it. Otherwise it would have been more neglected than it was, for there had long ceased to be any attempt to keep up anything that was not of stern service in supporting its owners. The old red brick walls surrounding it were crumbling in places, and one corner was gaping, and would soon fall if not repaired. The fruit trees trained on them were only here and there pruned and netted. The currants and raspberries from which the girls had been picking were not protected from the depredations of birds. Stakes and nets had long since rotted and not been replaced. The strawberry beds had not been replanted for years, nor the asparagus beds salted. Docks grew profusely in corners, and weeds were plentiful everywhere. The kitchen garden, divided into two by its high walls, covered an acre of ground, and was too much for one man to look after, who with the help of a boy had to do everything that wanted doing outside, including tinkering repairs to the structure of the house, feeding of chickens and

pigs, cutting of wood, as well as the internal duties of 'boots, coals and knives.'

But, meagrely tended as it was, the kitchen garden was the best ordered of all that lay immediately around the house. The girls passed through an enclosure full of greenhouses, forcing-pits, tool and potting sheds, where everything was in the last stage of dilapidation —glass broken, woodwork perishing for lack of paint, doors off their hinges, rubbish accumulated everywhere. The great stable yard next to it was overgrown with grass. The once gilded hands of the turret clock, which had at some remote date stopped at the dejected hour of twenty minutes past seven, looked as if they would never have the energy to raise themselves again. Tiles had fallen from the roofs, and lay where they had fallen. The very pump had gone out of business. But pigeons were sunning themselves on the roof, and in the soft afternoon sunshine the effect was not so much of desolation as of mellow tranquillity.

They deposited their baskets of fruit in the great stone-flagged kitchen, where the fat cook blessed their bonny faces and said she was glad to hear that there would be a bit of money to spend now. If Mrs. Conway was considered something of a scourge by the servants of the house, the rest of the family was adored by them, with the possible exception of Penelope, who was considered to be precociously 'taking after her ma.' There was an amount of friendliness between them and the servants quite unusual in large houses. Sydney Conway had more than 'a pleasant word' for them whenever he met them; he was in and

out of their quarters almost as much as his own, and could often be seen sitting on one of the kitchen tables enjoying a lively and lengthy conservation with the cook, who did not hesitate on occasions to send him about his business on the score of interruption of her work. This and other similar habits of his caused Mrs. Conway infinite annoyance, which she sometimes expressed strongly. If he made himself so free, how could he expect to gain the respect of the servants? It is doubtful whether respect was the strongest article of their attitude towards him, but they never worried him for their wages when they were overdue, nor showed any desire to take service where they could get them paid more regularly. The cook, indeed, was a remnant of easier times—a forty pound a year artist, now reduced to twenty-five. She had come to Watermeads immediately after Fred's birth, and had had a kitchen maid under her, as well as the agreeable society of seven or eight other indoor servants, besides men in the stables and gardens. So her devotion was well proved. Fred was the apple of her eye. After him came Rose, because of her beauty, but she loved Elsie hardly less. Upon Bobby and Billy she exercised her tongue, and sometimes her hand; but they could always get what they wanted from her. On her reduced and precarious wages she was perhaps the happiest person in the house. She liked the freedom of her lot. In her noble kitchen she reigned supreme, and it was as much a centre of intelligence and discussion as the great hall, or the parlour which the Conways chiefly inhabited in the winter. She had had nothing like the position she

now enjoyed when she had been surrounded by a staff of servants, and the two parts of the house had kept apart. The only disquietude in her life was that Penelope, whom she had adored as a baby, would have nothing to do with her petting. That small minx could get what she wanted from her without the necessity of making any return of affection. The fat tender-hearted woman was her devoted slave. She was often made very unhappy when she had taken pains to please the small tyrant and was refused the reward of a caress. She would go about quite miserable, but the smallest sign of relenting on Penelope's part would bind the chains on her still further. She had some warmth of feeling even for Mrs. Conway, who would sometimes make a confidante of her. She admired her mistress's stateliness, and regretted for her sake that it could not be exercised in more elaborate surroundings.

"Well, if you're not as pink and sweet as a raspberry yourself!" she said, beaming on Rose as she received the basket from her. "We shan't keep *you* at home, my pretty, I'll be bound; and now you'll be able to get yourself some nice clothes, and we shall see what we *shall* see."

"You silly old woman," said Rose, half turning from her with a blush. "You'll see nothing except what you've always seen. Come along, Elsie, we'll go and meet Dad."

"Ah, you don't deceive *me*," said the cook, with an arch smile, as the girls went out. "If Master Fred's coming home, there'll be somebody else too; and it won't be for Master Fred he'll be coming over."

Elsie looked at Rose as they went through the

sunny yard. The ice once broken in this way, it might be hoped that Rose would say something at last.

Rose looked down with a half-vexed smile, and then said: "Of course she means Jack Kirby, but it's too silly. He's always been Fred's friend, and never comes here except when Fred's at home."

Jack Kirby was the only son of Lord Kirby, a lately ennobled ship-owner who had bought Prittlewell Hall, about five miles from Watermeads, in the previous autumn. He had been at Cambridge with Fred Conway. Elsie might have said in answer to Rose that the Kirbys had only occupied their new house for the first time at Easter; that during the short vacation Jack had been over to see Fred a good deal more often than friendship demanded; that the same thing had happened at Whitsuntide; and that otherwise neither of the young men had been in the country.

But she jumped those obvious stages. "Oh, I'm sure he does like you, darling," she said, slipping her arm into Rose's. "And I don't wonder at it; you are so awfully sweet. Any young man would."

Rose was accustomed to Elsie's openly expressed admiration. She acknowledged it by a squeeze of the arm in hers. "He must think we're a very funny household," she said. "Elsie, supposing he did come here because—oh, well, because of me——"

"Yes?" said Elsie, as she paused.

"I mean we're so different from them, with all their money and luxury and everything."

Elsie understood her. "We shall both be all right now we can have a few new clothes," she said. "Noth-

ing else really matters; nobody's ashamed of being poor nowadays."

"I'm not so sure that *they* don't rather look down upon us because we're poor—and have to show it so plainly," Rose said. "Even *he* rather makes a boast of his money. Fred says so."

"Fred likes him, though."

"He told me that he had never known him very well at Cambridge. He was rather surprised at his making such a friend of him now. He thought it was because they were new, and we're old, although we're so poor."

Elsie laughed. "Men never see anything," she said. "Fred said he splashed his money about at Cambridge. I suppose it must be rather jolly to feel you've got a lot to spend, especially when you're young."

"Oh, yes. I suppose it's only that. I don't mean that I think he's purse-proud. I shouldn't like him at all if he were. Of course I do like him; he's so cheerful and friendly; and there aren't so many people who take the trouble to come over and see us now. You like him too, and he likes you. It isn't only me that he likes."

"Talking about Jack Kirby, I suppose," remarked Penelope, appearing from behind a large bush of syringa. "They're all coming down on Friday. Morris told me."

The two girls set upon her and rent her with scorn for an eavesdropping little cat. She received their censure unmoved. "Morris says they are going to have a large party at Prittlewell," she said.

Morris was the postman, whose radius included both Prittlewell and Watermeads, and who carried gossip as well as letters and parcels. The news that Penelope had obtained from him was allowed to outbalance her offence, when she had been duly chidden.

"If any of them *do* come over here, I should like to have something decent to wear—something that everybody hasn't seen before," said Rose.

The possibility was discussed until Penelope grew tired of it. "Who will play tennis with me?" she asked.

"We're going to find Dad," said Elsie. "Neither of us wants to play tennis; it's too hot."

"I want to play," Penelope persisted. "Mother said one of you were to."

"Did she say that this evening?" asked Rose. They were accustomed to Penelope's ways.

"She said you were always ready to play with one another, and you were to play sometimes with me; and I want to play now."

"Well, we're not going to play. Now go back and get us into a row with mother."

"Yes, I shall," said Penelope calmly, and walked away from them.

"Really she gets worse every day," said Rose, but with no particular signs of annoyance. "I wonder what other people would think of her, if we ever saw people for any length of time. She's all right when they're just visitors."

"She's a horrid child," said Elsie, with the same equability. "But what can you expect?"

The subject dropped. This was about as near as they ever came to criticism of their mother.

They went out through a gate leading from the shrubbery into the open park, which still contained some fine trees, although not a few had been cut down and sold for their timber. Sydney Conway had devoted much energy of mind to preserving those which, either singly or in groups, would make the others less missed. They came to the gently gliding river, and presently to a bridge, over which ran a path to the village. The bridge was masked from the path leading from the house by a group of trees, and when they came to it they saw their old friend the Vicar crossing it towards them, and a little farther on the bank a comparatively new friend in the person of an artist seated at his easel. The Vicar's name was Bonner, and the artist's Bellamy.

The Vicar's face lighted up when he saw the two girls. He was an elderly man, with the scholar's stoop on his thin shoulders, and a singularly sweet expression of face. "Well, my dears," he said, "this is well met. I was just on my way to see how Mr. Bellamy is getting on with his picture. Now we can go and look at it all together. What's the news about the other picture?"

They told him what the Raeburn had fetched. "Well, I hoped it would fetch more, but didn't expect it to fetch so much," he said. "I don't follow these modern prices."

"The boys will be able to go to school now," said Elsie.

"Yes; it has always been ear-marked for that,

hasn't it? Well, I've got the young scamps ready. I think they'll do us credit."

The girls were walking on either side of him with their arms in his. They had always loved him dearly since their childhood. Now both of them gave him a simultaneous squeeze of affection. They knew well enough what a good friend he had shown himself. In a thousand little ways he had eased the burden of poverty as it affected their own lives, and in the matter of Bobby and Billy he had done a very big thing. For some years he had devoted himself, quietly and steadily, to educating them without any reward but that of friendship and good conscience. He had set aside long and regular hours for them, giving up much of his own loved work to take up again the drudgery of schoolmastering. The boys, and he with them, had had their regular holidays. Otherwise lesson hours had been inviolate. And a greater achievement even than this long-continued sacrifice of valuable time had been that it had been made to be felt not as a burdensome benefit but as an act of friendship, giving as much pleasure to the one side as to the other. No wonder that the girls loved their old friend, and he them!

There was no time for further conversation between them before they reached the artist on the river bank. He rose from his stool to greet them as they came up. He was a tall rather grave-looking man, not very young but not yet middle-aged, though with his fair closely-clipped beard he may have appeared so to modern eyes. He had been staying in one of the picturesque cottages in the village for about a month,

spending most of his days painting, but apparently ready, though not anxious, for whatever mild social intercourse was open to him in the intervals. The Vicar had made friends with him, and had taken him to Watermeads, where he had gradually come to be accepted as an unobtrusive guest whom it was agreeable but not very exciting to see. He talked little, but seemed to have the gift of companionable silence, as no-one felt either bored or awkward in his presence. The girls liked him, but did not discuss him much. Mrs. Conway unbent before him, and was in process of finding him a sympathetic listener, as she poured out to him more and more of the rich store of her memory. He would sit and look at her with inscrutable eyes as she talked, and leave her with the impression that he had talked a good deal too, though he may have uttered no more than monosyllables. Sydney Conway discussed art with him, in which he was interested, as in most things, and he listened to him too, but did not entirely withold his speech or ideas in return. For Sydney Conway was a clever fellow, with ideas of his own, and there lingered with him a youthful enthusiasm that was one of his most attractive qualities. And, finally, the precocious and watchful Penelope was on the look-out for signs of interest in him towards either Elsie or Rose, but particularly Rose, and had as yet found none.

Bellamy's picture, now nearing completion, of the old stone bridge, with the placid stream flowing under its arches, and the willows and poplars beyond, was duly appraised, while he stood by with his palette on his arm and said nothing. But it was a beautiful

picture, and he must have known it. Then, after a few words of general conversation, he said that he had nearly finished for the evening, and would walk with them to Sandford Hole.

He walked with Elsie. She told him about the price that the Raeburn had fetched and what was to be done with the money. The financial shifts to which the Conway family had been reduced of late years seemed to all of them a natural subject for conversation with their friends, and Bellamy had already come to be regarded as a friend.

He looked down at her from his height of over six feet with a smile that made his somewhat plain face pleasant enough. "I like Bobby and Billy," he said kindly. "I'm glad they are going to a good school."

"Were you at Charterhouse?" she asked him.

"No," he said, but did not tell her where he had been at school. He had never told any of them anything about himself, which made it all the more remarkable that they were so ready to tell him everything. Elsie prattled on to him, and he listened to her and made an occasional remark, until they reached Sandford Hole, where they became merged in the larger group.

In the meantime, the Vicar had given Rose a piece of news. "Olivia is coming home," he said. "She has been too long away from her old father. But what changes I shall have to make in my bachelor ways, Rose!"

Rose expressed warm pleasure. "It will make a lot of difference to us," she said. "We have always missed Olivia, Elsie and I, and it is nearly three years

since we have seen her. How could you have done without her for so long?"

"Well, I have missed her too. Perhaps I couldn't have done without her if I hadn't been to Italy to see her twice in the meantime. But her aunt has not been able to do without her either. I couldn't get her back before, much as I wanted her."

"How is it that her aunt can do without her now?"

He looked at her with a whimsical expression. "Aunts are curious beings," he said. "This particular one has recovered her health, and it seems to have had the effect of diminishing her desire for Olivia's society. But if she doesn't want the dear child any longer, I do; and this time I shall hope to keep her for a bit."

"We all want her," said Rose. "I suppose she is very beautiful now. She always was, but she wasn't grown up when she went away the last time."

"I think she is beautiful," said the Vicar simply.

CHAPTER IV

AN EVENING DRIVE

The dynamic accessories of Watermeads had been reduced to a donkey and a governess cart, which would hold two with some approach to comfort and four with a still nearer approach to anguish. But the donkey refused to trot with more than two, and was seldom called upon to carry the full load. But it was a good donkey when its whims were considered, and trotted along gaily enough with Elsie and Rose as they drove to the station on Friday evening to meet Fred.

The perfect June weather still held. The beautiful country around Watermeads was deliciously soothing to the spirit on this still and dewy evening, and the two girls, who seldom moved away from it from one year's end to the other, and would have welcomed a change to more crowded surroundings, felt its influence and expressed their pleasure in it. They drove down through the park, with its soft rich grass and its handsome groups of trees, and out into the village past a handsome stone-built lodge, the state of repair of which gave no indication of the dilapidated state of much that it ostensibly guarded. But it was no longer inhabited by a lodge-keeper. It had been done up and let as a week-end cottage to a tradesman from the neighbouring town of Sherbrook. As a consequence, there was no one to deal with the handsome

iron gates which it flanked, and these had been for so long left hospitably open that it would have been a difficult matter to close them. The general effect of the handsome entrance was somewhat marred by a row of hurdles stretching across it to keep the cattle from making journeys of investigation into the village street. In such matters as these the Squire of Watermeads was blissfully undisturbed at his poverty being made apparent, but Mrs. Conway never used this exit if she could possibly help it. There were others less handsome but less marred.

The two hurdles in the middle were easily movable, and the sight was not unknown to the village of an elaborately accoutred footman opening them to admit of an equipage belonging to richer neighbours. The removal of one of these by Rose enabled Elsie to drive the donkey through, and neither of the girls felt any more shame at the necessity than their father would have done—not even when a great raking varnished coroneted car passed them as they were making their way through. There was a wave from the car as it hummed past them. It was on its way to Prittlewell from Sherbrook, where the fast train from London stopped. Fred would come on by the slow one which served the branch line. The Kirbys might have given him a lift, said Elsie, but Rose was glad that they hadn't; it would have meant missing the drive and the pleasant saunter home, during which Fred would tell them about everything.

The village, which was grouped chiefly about the east gate, was no more than a straggling row of very picturesque cottages flanked by an equally picturesque

inn. There were some little shops, only one of which gave itself the slightest air of importance, the others mostly displaying their wares behind the small-paned windows of ground-floor rooms. In this rich month of June walls were covered with roses and gardens ablaze with homely flowers. The road ran straight between the cottages on one side and the wall of the park on the other. Trees had been left to grow tall at this point, and the tower of the church showed beyond them some distance down the road. The village of Watermeads, in the past no more than an appanage of the great house, was as pretty a one as could be found anywhere in England, and was always being painted by artists, who also found innumerable subjects in the pleasant water-meadows that surrounded it, and in the more hilly and wooded scenery into which the flat country soon changed on either side.

After the village came an old Jacobean farmhouse, snugly and solidly facing the high road, with its accompaniment of yards and mellow out-buildings, gardens, orchards and horse-pond. Haymaking was going on in the wide fields that stretched on the further side of it; the scent of the hay was delicious; the voices of the haymakers at some distance off alone broke the perfect silence of the dewy evening.

The river was crossed by another old stone bridge, alongside of which was a water-mill with cottage and garden attached. The mill was built of tarred weather-boarding, with a red tiled roof, and was shadowed by a group of tall poplars. This was another beauty spot much affected by artists.

Here the Watermeads property ended. The road

began to rise, and soon entered a noble beech-wood, which continued for a mile until it gave place to a sandy heath. A further dip revealed the village of Sailsby, two and a half miles from Watermeads, and the nearest point to it on the line.

The greeting between brother and sisters showed an affection and mutual interest pleasant enough to see. Fred Conway was what would have been called in past days a very personable young man. He was better looking than his father, but had the same amiability of expression, and, it must be confessed, the same apparent absence of driving force. He was of medium height, but slim and muscular. He, as well as his father, had been in the Charterhouse Eleven, and had been near to getting his 'blue' at Cambridge. He was one of those young men to whom life, and especially English life, holds out innumerable pleasures, provided there is a sufficiency of money and leisure. With the opportunities of his friend Jack Kirby, Fred would have been a highly popular member of society, and could have filled the golden days of his youth as richly as any of his contemporaries. At school he had not felt the lack of opportunity, and very little at Cambridge, where, however, the comparative meagreness of his allowance had deprived him of some of the social pleasures he would have been fitted to enjoy. He had since had a good opportunity given to him of making his way, and even, if he could take advantage of it, of repairing the broken fortunes of his house. But it provided him at present with no more than subsistence, and he was cut off from many of the pleasures that his father had enjoyed in his youth, and

that would have been his right as heir to Watermeads, if Watermeads had been a support instead of a burden.

The cousin of his mother's who had taken him into his office was a rich man, but had made himself so, and had lived contentedly all his married life in a London suburb, first in a small house, and then in a large one. He provided Fred with a salary which enabled him to live comfortably enough in two rooms in the same suburb, but to take very few of his pleasures outside of it. The salary was a hundred and twenty pounds a year, which Mr. Wilkins considered very handsome for a clerk just learning his work, as indeed it was. Out of this, Fred had to keep himself entirely, and did so without getting into debt. He had never got into debt at Cambridge either, which perhaps betokened more force of character than his ready amiability gave warrant for. But it was of the same quality as the general family readiness to accept poverty without thinking of it. Sydney Conway would never have got into debt either, if Watermeads had not hung like a millstone round his neck. As it was, he did without everything that could possibly be done without, and if the time should come when a crash could not be averted, it would leave him solvent, though denuded of his beloved Watermeads.

Fred showed no inclination to grumble at his lot, and indeed there was nothing in it to grumble at, except in comparison with what a young man of his birth and education might have demanded. Hillstead was one of the pleasantest of the old fashioned London suburbs, with plenty of large houses and large gar-

dens, in which an unattached young man could amuse himself with whatever hospitality in the way of dinners and dances and tennis-playing might be offered to him. Fred found no lack of amusement or companionship for his hours and days of leisure, and was fortunate in finding them in the place in which he lived, where they cost him nothing in return. But he was cut off from London gaieties, from week-end country visits, from the sociability of good cricket, and indeed from everything that would have taken him into a wider world than that in which he lived at Hillstead. He had to be careful of every penny. He hardly ever used the club to which he had been elected at the age of twenty-one, nor lunched with his school and Cambridge friends in the City; for his own lunch he had to be content with a tea-shop. Occasionally he went to the pit of a theatre. Clothes were an anxiety, but he did manage to produce the effect of being well dressed on a very small expenditure indeed.

Looked at squarely, the deprivations suffered by this agreeable young man were nothing at all in comparison with the advantages he gained from having to live on a small income, and doing it, without getting into debt. His character was braced, and none of the pleasures he did enjoy carried with them any reaction. He was practising the difficult art of doing without, which is an important part of the whole difficult art of living. That he had a gift for the lesser as well as for the greater art was part of his family inheritance.

Fred's kit-bag was put into the donkey-cart, which Rose drove, while he and Elsie walked one on either

side of her. The Kirbys *had* offered him a lift in their motor-car, but he had refused it because he liked better going home in this way. When he told his sisters this, they felt that sense of grateful confidence in him which is one of the sweetest fruits of family affection. The Kirbys, with the wealth that enfolded them like a garment, were still something of an excitement to the Conway family. It would have been quite natural that Fred should have accepted their invitation to drop him at the gates of Watermeads an hour or more before he would otherwise have got there. But his sisters were more to him than the Kirbys, and the pleasure of this makeshift home-coming in their company more than the opulent progression offered to him.

They were soon deep in intimate converse. With his working hours spent in the City and his leisure time in a London suburb, Fred yet represented the great world to these country home-keeping girls, and they wanted to know all about it. But for the complete sympathy between them, he might have had little of any interest to tell. But their interest was in him and his doings, and no detail was too small to hold their attention or to set their imagination working.

It was Cousin Henry first of all—a somewhat enigmatic figure that took on a slightly new aspect every time that Fred came home and told them about him. Two years before he had brought his wife and four young daughters to Watermeads for a summer holiday —as paying guests. The experiment had not been a brilliant success. Mrs. Conway and Mrs. Wilkins had

not 'hit it off'; the four children had missed the delights of their usual seaside holiday and been heavy in hand. Cousin Henry had presented a ponderous cigar-smoking newspaper-reading figure not without alleviating points. Except when he had been active over excursions, on which he had expended much money on the hire of motor-cars, his chief occupation had been to sit about; but he had always been ready to talk kindly, if not very entertainingly, to any member of the Conway family who chose to keep him company. He had prevented an open breach between his wife and Mrs. Conway, and had even made himself liked by Mrs. Conway, who had been able to express herself to him without producing those manifest signs of boredom that were the frequent result of her conversations with outsiders. He had always been anxious to include a young Conway—more than one was not possible unless a young Wilkins was to be left behind—in the excursions, and had proffered golden and tactful solace for his final withdrawal from Watermeads. If, in his habits and appearance, he was totally unlike the country gentlemen who represented well-endowed middle age to the Conway family, there were yet points of contact. He bulked as a rather mild kindly personage, with curious ways that set him apart but did not make him the less likable.

And he had kept up the connection, which his wife and children had taken no trouble to do. More gold had watered the aridness of the two successive Christmases—not thrown at its recipients from a height of patronage, but accompanied by kindly little messages, written in a clerky hand on business stationery, which

gave it exactly the right quality of gratification. A year ago he had come forward and given Fred his chance—another golden one, which had seemed to the eager hopeful family to hold out infinite possibilities. Decidedly, Cousin Henry had justified his cousinship, and could be looked upon, in spite of his unfamiliar habits, as one of the elect.

But the picture had had to be adjusted, as Fred had thrown successive new lights upon it. Cousin Henry, in the City, was not exactly the pliant figure he had appeared to be at Watermeads. He was known in his office as 'a Tartar,' and Fred had not altogether escaped uneasy contact with him. He had related little incidents which had made the girls wonder that they had felt so much at ease with Cousin Henry, 'if he was really like that.' Fred had been able to adapt himself to a new view of authority, which is so tempered to the undergraduate that it seems hardly like authority at all. But to Elsie and Rose it seemed that, in exacting from him in all respects the behaviour of a clerk, Cousin Henry was too apt to forget that Fred was also a gentleman. It threw some doubts upon his own claim to gentility, for which the ground was already prepared by his dissimilarity from type.

They might have adjusted themselves to the unfamiliar ways of 'offices' as exemplified by Fred's experience; it was Cousin Henry's behaviour to him out of business hours that they found it hard to understand. In his large comfortable villa 'Lawnside,' Fred was expected to present himself at regular intervals, and was treated as one of the family, to the extent

of never being allowed to feel that his presence made any difference to anybody. Few other young people ever went to the house, except friends of the girls, who were not yet quite grown up, in the daytime. The Wilkinses were great dinner givers. Once a month or so there would be an elaborate crowded table, at which such of the inhabitants of Hillstead as had welcomed them to their own tables would sit down to feast; but Fred was never invited to these solemn assemblies. That omission, at first unaccountable, had been forgiven. Fred had explained the ritual of these entertainments as it was practised in houses like 'Lawnside.' Sociability was only an incident in it. It was chiefly give and take. Young people were outside the sacred circle. There were houses in Hillstead at which he dined in the same way as he dined at houses around Watermeads, and sometimes in London, as a guest as welcome as any other; but 'Lawnside' was not one of them. Perhaps it would come to be so when the girls should arrive at an age at which other young people would be invited for their sakes.

But when all allowances had come to be made for the difference of social habit between Cousin Henry's life and that of the circles to which the Conways still belonged, there remained a feeling that he did not treat Fred as he ought to have treated him. Surely, when Fred had done the work required of him Cousin Henry should have left him free to go his own way! But he didn't. He was continually overlooking and interfering with him. It seemed that unless he could reduce him to the common measure of other young clerks, with a future before them, and no past that in-

cluded such accidents as a university education, he would never get him at all to his liking. He must 'stick to business'—time enough to amuse himself when he had shown what he was made of, and had money at his command. Sticking to business in this connection meant a very rigid allowance of holiday, not to be adapted to any call from outside, in the way that all Fred's previously made friends who were at work in 'offices' could more or less adapt them. But this was not all. It almost seemed that Cousin Henry was jealous of every circumstance attached to Fred that had not been attached to himself at the same age. He was certainly contemptuous, if not jealous, of Fred's three years at Cambridge. If he had wasted his own time in that way, he said, he would not have been in a position to marry at Fred's age, and head of a solid and increasing business a year or two later. He disliked mention of cricket. Cricket was a game to be played on Saturday afternoons and bank holidays, in places like Hillstead. This had been fully explained in the early days of Fred's clerkship, when he had asked to be allowed to anticipate three days of his coming holiday to play in the Meadshire County Eleven. Fred laughed now at his innocence in having ever thought of making such a request. He had a suspicion that Cousin Henry was jealous of the distinction that clung to him as the heir of Watermeads, although he was doing what he could to make that heirship no mere empty title. He never spoke of it except as a burden, and would frequently compare his own lot with that of Fred's father. "I remember very well what was thought among us," he would say,

" when your mother married your father. It was considered a great step up. County gentleman; fine estate; and all that. I was only a boy of seventeen then, but I'd been working for two years, and already had money laid by. I don't suppose your father would have thought I was worth looking at then. But look at us both now! Well, it isn't for me to say—but—you stick to business, my boy. It will put you wherever you want to be quicker than anything else. Why, if it suited me, I could live in a house like Watermeads, and keep it up as well as anybody. But it doesn't suit me. That's why I don't do it. I'm as good here as anybody, and I've no wish to go out of my class. It's a mistake, *I* say."

Thus Cousin Henry, in a Sunday after-dinner mood, strolling round the garden of ' Lawnside ' with a cigar, or sitting before the fire in the dining room in his gentleman's easy chair. It had seemed to come out by degrees that some memory of his holiday at Watermeads had slightly rankled in his mind. He had felt differences, and wished to entrench himself in his opulent respectability against any feeling of inferiority. It was another light on him, discussed with interest whenever Fred brought home any new material for reckoning him up.

The net result had not yet been arrived at. Against the items that weighed in Cousin Henry's disfavour had to be put the far more important ones of his having given Fred his golden chance, and of having provided him with an income upon which he could at least live in comfort. Fred knew enough now to tell them that the income was worth more than his value

as a clerk, and also that the partnership that had been held out to him as the goal of his efforts would be worth much money in Cousin Henry's pocket, if he chose to bargain with it elsewhere. These were big things in his favour; but small things are apt to outweigh big ones in such connection as this, and even the big ones were not quite free from suspicion. Why had Cousin Henry, in view of all that was tiresome in his behaviour, held out to Fred his golden chance? No quite satisfactory answer to that question had yet been found. But it was constantly being asked.

So it was Cousin Henry who came first into the conversation when the brother and sisters set out on their pleasant evening walk.

CHAPTER V

THE ELDEST SON

Fred had shown himself extremely cheerful on getting out of the train and greeting them, but his face fell a little when Rose asked him how Cousin Henry had been behaving. "Oh, all right," he said. "Well, no, not quite all right. But I'll tell you about him later. There's something else to tell you—two things. Oh, I'm full of news this time." He suddenly smiled radiantly, and put his hand affectionately on Rose's, as it lay on the side of the cart.

"Well, the first thing is I've made friends with Uncle Mark," he said.

This was news indeed, and invoked lively expressions of surprise and deep interest. Fred had dined two evenings before at Lord Kirby's great house in Berkeley Square—a semi-political men's dinner, to which his friend Jack had got him invited 'to take the edge off the old buffers.' One of the old buffers had been the Right Honourable Mark Drake, who, in spite of his long absence from the House of Commons, was still in the counsels of his party, and was much valued as a dinner guest for his amusing and caustic speech.

"I didn't know who he was until halfway through dinner," Fred told his story. "Jack and I and one or two secretaries and younger fellows were at the bot-

tom of the table, and he was up at the top, keeping them all pretty happy. He's rather a fine-looking old boy, better than that photograph father has of him. He's thin and tall, with a white pointed beard. He never laughs himself when he says something good; but everybody else does. They were in fits of laughter sometimes all round him, and he was talking away as grave as a judge, telling them a story, I suppose. Jack didn't know who he was when I asked him, but Ronny Greenwell—fellow who played cricket for Oxford when I was up—who snooped a seat for them last election—he told me it was Mark Drake.

"Well, I thought it would be rather jolly to get to know him, but I knew there wasn't any chance unless I got old Kirby or somebody to introduce me. I couldn't make up my mind whether to or not. What would you have done about it?"

The interpolated question showed many things, most of them nice ones, about Fred, and about his attitude to his sisters.

"Oh, of course you had to get to know him," Elsie answered it. "He'd be sure to like you when you did." Which was rather nice of her too.

"Well, I made up my mind I'd risk it. He couldn't bite my head off. But I didn't have to do anything. He was sitting next to old Kirby, and I suppose he told him about buying Prittlewell; and he must have said he knew it, and Watermeads, and us; and then old Kirby must have remembered that I was there, and pointed me out to him. That's how I worked it out afterwards. Anyhow, when I was looking at him I saw old Kirby point me out, and after dinner he in-

troduced me to him. He must have asked him to, I should think."

"What did he say? Was he nice to you?"

"He said: 'I thought I was about thirty years younger when I first saw you at the bottom of the table.' That was the first thing he said when he'd shaken hands, looking at me quite solemnly, but with a sort of pucker round his eyes."

"What did he mean?" asked Rose, as Fred paused.

He laughed. "I wanted to see whether you'd twig it," he said. "I did, fortunately. Do you know what he meant, Elsie?"

"Oh, of course he meant you were so like Dad," said Elsie. "You are sometimes."

"Yes, that was it," said Fred, with a shade of disappointment. "I suppose it's easy enough to see now, but when I was feeling a trifle nervous—and old Kirby does you jolly well when you dine with him too—well, I had to tumble to it at once. But you know there were about forty people dining, and I hadn't seen him throw a look at our end of the table before Kirby pointed me out. I call it pretty good of him to have spotted me like that, don't you?"

"Yes," said Elsie. "What did you say to him?"

"I said: 'I suppose father often used to dine out with you when he was your secretary.' That was the right thing to say, wasn't it? I couldn't think of anything better for the moment."

"It was perfectly brilliant, darling," said Elsie. "What did he say to that?"

"I think he was pleased that I'd taken him up so quickly. He asked me how Dad was, and said he

hadn't seen much of him lately, but he'd been busy writing letters and doing other little jobs."

"But, Fred! It is over twenty-five years since he would have anything to do with father." It was Rose who spoke, in wide-eyed astonishment. Elsie only laughed.

"I know," said Fred, "but I saw he was only ragging, though he looked as solemn as an owl. I said: 'When you've finished your letters, I know he'll be jolly pleased to see you again. He's told us a lot about you.'"

"Really, Fred dear, that *was* rather brilliant," said Elsie.

"Well, you see, old Kirby does you jolly well, and I was feeling so comfortable inside that I didn't care a damn. Besides, I felt a sort of kindly feeling towards him. *You* know. I liked the look of him and his way of saying things; and after all, he's our only relation on the Conway side. I thought it would be a good egg if we could make friends."

"Well? And did you?"

"I think so. I'm not quite sure. He was looking at me all the time we were talking—it wasn't very long—and I thought he liked me all right. But suddenly he said: 'Well, I'm very glad to have met you,' and turned his back on me and talked to somebody else. I didn't speak to him again, and he didn't take any more notice of me—didn't even look at me or say goodbye when he went away."

"That's rather disconcerting," said Elsie. "Perhaps you said something that annoyed him. What did you talk about?"

"Oh, about cricket a little. He'd asked me whether I'd had any education, and I told him I'd been at Charterhouse and Trinity. I thought he seemed rather bucked at that. He was at Trinity himself, oh, hundreds of years ago, and I said I thought he would see some changes if he went there now."

"That wasn't quite so brilliant, Freddy dear."

"No, perhaps not, but I had to keep it rolling. He seemed to expect me to do most of the talking. He did talk a bit about cricket though. He used to play, and watches matches now. He said he hadn't noticed my name anywhere, and I said I'd played once or twice for the County, but couldn't do it much now as I was tied by the leg in the City."

"Did you tell him about Cousin Henry?"

"Yes, I said he'd taken me into his office, and he said 'Who the devil's Cousin Henry?' I'd forgotten for the moment that he didn't know anything about him. I said he was Mr. Wilkins, a cousin of mother's."

"Oh, Fred!" This from Rose.

"Well, I think I was quite right, don't you, Elsie? We can't chuck mother over to please him."

"Oh, I didn't mean that," said Rose hastily, and the others refrained from asking her what she had meant.

"Of course you are right," said Elsie. "Was that when he turned his back on you—when you told him that?"

"No. He asked me how I liked the City, and I said I liked it all right, and was lucky to have the chance I had. I thought I ought to say something of

that sort because of Cousin Henry. After all, he's never done anything to give us a leg up, and he could if he'd wanted to."

"You didn't tell him that, I suppose?" from Elsie.

"No. But he changed the subject all of a sudden, and said: 'I see your father's just sold another picture;' and I said: 'Yes, he had to do it to send my two young brothers to school. He sold one to send me to school, and another to send me to Cambridge.' He could make what he liked of that. I expect he saw it right enough."

"What did he look like when you told him that? Did he say anything?"

"He didn't look anything particular. He said: 'Are your two young brothers like you, or are you the bright flower of the flock?' I saw he only wanted to pull my leg. I said: 'They've got a few more brains than I have. If they get my chances I expect they'll make more of them than I did. I'm a bit of a duffer at books, but I'm a sticker. So are they.' I didn't want him to go away with the idea that I thought myself clever, though I was standing up to him pretty well. It was then that he seemed to feel he'd had enough of me for the present. He turned round, and that was the end of it."

It was an end that did not seem to hold out promise of much further intercourse between the Right Honourable Mark Drake and his great-nephew. After some discussion the subject was postponed for further consideration at home.

"Now tell us about Cousin Henry," said Elsie. "But first of all what is your other piece of news?"

Fred smiled a sudden happy smile. "I'll tell you that last," he said. His face fell again. "I believe Cousin Henry wants to shift me," he said.

"Oh, Fred!" from both girls at once.

"I'm sure I've stuck to it as well as I know how. But he's always grumbling. He told me the other day that I had less aptitude for business than any clerk he's ever had in his office. He said I knew just about as much after a year as when I'd come in."

"He really is rather awful—the things he says," said Rose.

"I was annoyed. He's been grumbling at me for weeks about all sorts of silly little notions—outside the office chiefly. I hate going to his house now, though Aunt Kate's always pleased to see me, and I like the girls; they're not so bad when you get to know them. What he really hates is my being any different from him. He did this and that when he was my age, and why can't I do the same? Ever since he knew I was going to dine with the Kirbys', he's been talking about people who like lords, and don't think ordinary people good enough for them. I've tried to make a joke of it, but it's jolly difficult to keep it up, when you can see it isn't really a joke with him."

"We never thought he was like that when he was at Watermeads," said Rose. This was the stock remark when any new vagary of Cousin Henry's was disclosed.

"It's his little particular weakness coming out," said Elsie. "What did you say to him, Fred, when he complained about your work?"

"He didn't exactly complain about it. I've done

the work all right. I've taken pains about it, and there's a lot to learn. I said: 'You're always finding fault with me, Cousin Henry; but I've put my back into it all the same, and I think I've got the hang of the work of the office.' He said: 'Any Board School boy with ordinary brains could get that, in a year. But you're a University man, you know. We expect rather more from them than from Board School boys; and we don't get it.' That's the sort of thing. It's been going on for weeks now. What it means is, that he thinks I'm good enough as a clerk—he can't deny that I do my work properly—but not good enough for anything else. I haven't brought any business into the office; that's one thing. He's always talking about my grand friends, as he calls them, and asking why I can't get a few of them as clients. But I can't go cadging round. Besides, I hardly ever see anybody outside Hillstead. I haven't got the stuff to go about with."

"And he doesn't seem to like your going about," said Elsie. "I think he's very unreasonable. I wonder whether that was the reason he took you in—to help him with people."

"Well, of course a broker is always on the look out for new clients. All ours are Cousin Henry's own sort. I think perhaps I might do something if I saw more people. Anyhow, it's rather early days yet; I told him that, and he couldn't deny it. But he goes on grumbling all the same. I'm getting fed up with it."

"Do you really think that he wants to get rid of you?"

"It looks as if it was blowing up for that. What I feel about it is that there's *something* he expects of me that he doesn't get. I don't believe it has anything to do with my work. I'm not a genius at it, perhaps, but I'm not a duffer either, nor a slacker. If he does want to get rid of me though, that will be the excuse —that I'm not shaping to it, and it's no good going on. I can't see him offering me a partnership now— the way things are going."

"That's rather awful," said Rose. "It's the one thing we've been fixing our hopes upon, to save Watermeads."

"Well, I'm not going to say anything about it at home yet. I may be mistaken, and he's just grumbling because it's his nature to. Anyhow, I've got two days' holiday, and I'm going to enjoy myself and forget all about Cousin Henry till I go back again."

"Poor old boy!" said Rose. "It's lovely to have you here. What's your other piece of news?"

The happy smile came over Fred's face again. "I said I'd tell you when it was coming," he said, "and it's come. I'm in love."

They had reached the twilit shades of the beechwood. Rose pulled up the donkey, and all three of them stood and laughed at one another on the sandy road.

"Oh, there's no doubt about it this time," Fred said, as they went on again. "I wish you could see her. I'm sure you'll say that she's as beautiful as any girl you've ever seen; and sweet and kind and nice too."

"But who is she, Freddy darling?"

"Oh, Freda Blumenthal. I've told you about the Blumenthals."

"No, you haven't, except that you went to a dance there."

"Well, I've been there a good deal since. It's a funny thing: I always thought she was awfully pretty, and I used to like her and like dancing with her, and all that; but I wasn't a bit in love. Then all of a sudden it seemed to come. We got to be pals somehow, and I talked to her about things that I hadn't thought of talking about before, to girls I just like, up in Hillstead, and dance with."

"What sort of things?"

"Oh, about you, and Watermeads and everything. She was so sympathetic. That's what made me like her first—in a special way, I mean. I told her about old Cousin Henry and how tiresome he was, and how I had to try to stick to it with him so as to be able to get enough money to clear Watermeads, and be what we'd been there before. She was awfully sweet about it, and asked me all sorts of questions—*you* know, in a way that showed she was really interested, and not only pretending."

"Elsie and I were talking about it the other day, and saying we hoped you would marry an heiress," said Rose, "—only if you loved her, of course."

Fred laughed. "If I only had the luck to marry *her!*" he said. "I haven't got nearly as far as that yet. I suppose she must be an heiress, though I never thought of it when I fell in love with her. Her father is simply rolling in it, and she hasn't any brothers or sisters."

"Is he a German? It sounds rather a German kind of name," said Rose.

Elsie laughed at her. "Oh, no, dear; it's a Chinese name," she said. Rose was a little given to the obvious, and this was the family way of dealing with such remarks. But Elsie herself asked: "Is he a real German, Freddy? I shouldn't like that for a Conway." The war had not yet come, to make the very thought of a German that of an unclean thing; but the Conways were English of the English.

"He *is* a German," said Freddy apologetically; "But I believe he has always lived in England, and he likes to be thought an Englishman. Mrs. Blumenthal is English, and Freda has never been in Germany, and can't even talk German."

"Are they the people that live next to Cousin Henry?"

"Oh, no. Those are the Warings. The Blumenthals live at Hillstead Manor, as they call it. I told you all about it when I went there first."

"Oh, those people! But Freddy, you said they were rather vulgar."

Fred blushed. "They're not really," he said. "It was only that I looked at things rather differently when I first went to live at Hillstead."

Elsie was still a little disturbed. "It is rather vulgar to call an enormous new house Hillstead Manor, isn't it?" she said. "And you laughed at the decorations and the picture-gallery and the airs they gave themselves."

Fred still showed discomfort. "Perhaps the house is rather vulgar," he said, "but Blumenthal didn't

build it. He bought it from a man who had pulled down the old manor-house; and the grounds are lovely. You couldn't believe you were so near London. He couldn't help it being called the Manor; and it had always been called that before."

"Yes, but the furniture and pictures!"

"Oh, well, he *is* German by birth. He hasn't got the best of taste. But Freda has. Her frocks are lovely."

"You said they gave themselves airs."

"It was Cousin Henry who said that. If I said it I suppose I took it from him. They are much richer than anybody else in Hillstead, and live in the largest house, except Lord Marlow's, which hardly seems to belong to the place, as they don't seem to mix in with any of the Hillstead people when they are there. I tell you I'm considered a terrific blood in Hillstead because I go there sometimes. But I should never have set eyes on them if we hadn't known them in Meadshire."

"Doesn't Cousin Henry know the Marlows?"

"Good Lord, no! He was green with envy when I went there first, though he tried to hide it. It was rather pathetic. He kept on asking me afterwards what I'd said to them about *him*."

"Yes, of course, you told us that. I'd forgotten. I suppose he knows the Blumenthals."

"Only just. They're not in the same set. There are lots of sets in Hillstead, you know. I told you all about that. Cousin Henry's is what I call the purely commercial."

"Isn't Mr. Blumenthal purely commercial?"

"Well, yes, I suppose he is. But the house counts for a good deal, and the fact that he's so rich. Oh, well, it's no good denying that he isn't like *us*. But Freda is. She's been in Paris, and all that; talks French as well as English. I don't think it much matters nowadays. After all, old Kirby was nobody when he began; certainly no better than Blumenthal, except that he was English. It's Freda that matters."

The rest of the homeward journey was taken up with talk about Freda. Fred knew she liked him, and hoped that she liked him very much. He could not be quite certain of it. She varied a little. Sometimes she made him as happy as a king, sometimes he was doubtful whether he wasn't hoping too much. He shouldn't be able to keep it to himself much longer. He'd have to risk it, in spite of his poverty and the conspicuous wealth of the Blumenthals. He thought he would rush it at a big dance that was to take place at the Manor in about a fortnight's time. It depended. If he did decide to, he would write to them in the afternoon before the dance, and if taking the risk proved blissfully to be justified, he would send them a wire the next morning. "The very first thing, Freddy dear." Yes, the very first thing.

So they came home to Watermeads, in the sweet dusk of the summer evening. The great coach-house received the poor little governess-cart, and the donkey was turned out into the park. Fred carried his bag into the house through the back regions, and Elsie and Rose went to see to the final arrangement of the supper table, which was one of their duties. All three of them were as happy as they could be.

CHAPTER VI

HOLIDAY

Supper was a late meal at Watermeads. In summer time it was not until dark. Sydney Conway was always extolling the freedom that came from having given up dining late. Instead of coming in to an eight o'clock dinner in broad daylight you could stay out as long as you liked. The evening was the best part of the day, and you had four or five hours of it before you after tea. Besides, it was much more comfortable to change into clean flannels than into evening clothes; and you went to bed—as soon as you liked—feeling much better than if you had a heavy meal sitting on your chest. In this way he was accustomed to discount the various successive changes in habit that his poverty had brought him. But he did really enjoy the much simpler life he was forced to lead, and only felt the pinch here and there, as, for instance, in the absence of horses in the stable, and also in the curb that had to be put upon his hospitable instincts.

At half past nine on the evening of Fred's arrival the family, with the exception of Penelope, assembled in the dining-room. Except for the bare space on the wall, from which Grandfather George had been removed to fill up the place of Grandfather John—no further adjustment having yet been carried out—there

was little in the aspect of the room to betoken the decline from a more spacious use. Wallpaper, curtains and carpet were faded and worn, but the walls were still almost covered with pictures, the curtains on the row of tall windows toned into the mellow effect better than new ones would have done, and the great stretch of Turkey carpet was only patched here and there. The heavy Spanish mahogany of the furniture glowed richly in the lamplight. Elsie and Rose kept it polished, as well as the massive plate that still adorned dining-table and sideboards. An eyesore was the large lamp suspended from the ceiling above the round table. Its elaborate pink shade could not disguise its cheapness. But oil costs less than candles, and the single lamp sufficed to light the table brilliantly, though the distant sideboards were in dusky twilight and the corners of the room almost in darkness.

The silver and flowers on the table somewhat disguised the bare simplicity of the meal. There was a dish of *macaroni au gratin*, and the rest was bread and eggs, with vegetables and fruit from the garden. Meat was seldom eaten at supper. Sydney Conway had developed a theory that meat once a day was as much as was good for health; also that the most sparing use of alcohol benefited the human frame. His own health at the age of fifty-two was perfect, and he had the bodily activity of a man ten or fifteen years younger. In expansive moments he would declare that if he should ever get enough money to live at Watermeads in the style of his fathers, he should still carry on the present simplicity in the matter of food and drink and the hours of meals. No doubt it suited him,

but he always ate and drank freely of what was put before him when he dined with his neighbours, and as a lavish hospitality would certainly have resulted as the first sign of recovered wealth, it is probable that he would have resigned himself contentedly to the usual habits of the large country house.

Fred's incipient love affair was a secret between himself and Elsie and Rose, and nothing was to be said yet about Cousin Henry's supposed readiness to get rid of him. But his meeting with Uncle Mark provided conversation for the whole of the meal. It was an event of capital importance in the history of the family. There was no knowing what might come of it. Uncle Mark had always been a rich man, and he had lived for many years past in quite a small house in London, in such a way that, unless he had outside claims upon him of which no one knew anything, he must have been saving thousands of pounds a year, and by this time must be a very rich man indeed. By a stroke of the pen, almost, he might have relieved all the anxieties that were gathering more and more thickly about Watermeads, and yet made no least little change in his own life. And help was to have been expected of him. It was not like poor relations hanging on to a rich one upon whom they had no claims. He had filled the position of a father to Sydney Conway in his late boyhood and early youth. The career towards which he had helped him was not one in which money was to be earned. It had been understood that it would not be necessary to earn money, while at the same time it was known that Watermeads could not supply what was necessary. Yet Water-

meads was to have been later on part of the stock in trade—a large estate and a fine country house for a County Member.

And Uncle Mark had never quarrelled with his nephew. He had said something rude about the woman he was about to marry, which had been hotly resented. He had laughed it off, and it was Sydney who had withdrawn himself. Then Sydney had written to him asking him to his wedding, and he had not answered the letter, but after the marriage had sent him a wedding present. Another letter had been written some months later asking him to Watermeads. He had answered it long after the date for which he had been invited, with a careless apology. He had never been to Watermeads, and his letters in answer to Sydney's, at long intervals, had been quite friendly but quite indifferent. He had never written of his own accord nor asked his nephew to see him in London. Some years before the date of this story, when life at Watermeads had come to be no longer possible on the lines of ordinary country house existence, Sydney had made his appeal. It had been left unanswered, and there had been no intercommunication since.

What was attempted over the supper table was a gauging, from Fred's account, of the effect his meeting with Uncle Mark might have upon the family fortunes. Was he tired of holding aloof? Now that he was getting old, would he not be glad to identify himself again with his only relations?

Mrs. Conway had a good deal to say about this. Her general attitude towards Uncle Mark was one of stately but not altogether unforgiving offence. She

had been grossly and 'unaccountably'—a very favourite word of hers—insulted, but she was willing to forget. It was not, however, to be expected that the injured should take the first step. Uncle Mark must 'come to his senses' before he could be taken back into favour. But as he had shown no disposition during five and twenty years to come to his senses, this attitude, while supporting her dignity, had long ceased to have any practical bearing on the situation. She now slightly changed it, and showed more anxiety to accept an opportunity for reconciliation than she had ever shown before.

"This meeting may be the beginning of happier things," she said. "It is only to be expected that a man nearing the grave should cling to family ties. He must want the comfort of a home, the society of good and gentle women. He might have had all that here for years past. I cannot help thinking that he must often have longed for it, and only his pride has caused him to hold out. By this time he must see how hollow the world is, and——"

"He didn't seem to me to be wanting much more than he's getting now," said Fred. "He doesn't strike one as an old man at all. He isn't more than seventy, is he father? He seems much younger."

"That is not the point, Fred," said Mrs. Conway. "They say a man is as old as he feels and a woman as old as she looks, and as you will hardly be prepared to say that Uncle Mark is a woman, his looks have nothing to do with the question. You do not know how old he feels. You were not with him long enough to judge."

"And you weren't in a fit state to judge, as far as I can make out," said Sydney. "In fact, from your account of the interview, I think you must have been rather drunk, Fred."

"Oh, no," said Fred, "I was only merry and bright."

"Well, I hope he liked you. I do hope he liked you. He used to like me; and seeing you may just have done the trick."

"I am more surprised than I can say, Sydney, to hear you refer in that light fashion to the possibility of Fred's being intoxicated," said Mrs. Conway. "I must confess that the same suspicion had crossed my own mind, but I put it away from me as too painful to be considered. If it was so——"

"Oh, but it wasn't so, mother," said Fred. "I'd done myself proud, but I was only a little more cheery and don't-carish than usual. I think it was a good thing. Uncle Mark could see what I was, and wouldn't think I was making up to him."

"I expect he liked Fred all right," said Bobby. Fred was the hero of his young brothers.

"The oracle has spoken," said their father. "When Bobby makes a pronouncement the matter can be considered settled. Yes, I think he *would* like Fred; and Fred seems to have kept enough of his wits, after doing himself proud—I withdraw the implication that he was drunk—to say one or two things that I know he'd like. The question is: is it to end there? Apart altogether from the money question, I *should* like to make friends with the old boy again. Hearing about him in that way—just as I used to know him so well

years ago—has given me a sort of longing to see him. We used to have a lot of fun together. He can't have altered much, from what Fred says."

"You say 'altogether apart from the money question,' Sydney," said Mrs. Conway, with the air of bringing her mind to bear upon an abstract question. "But can you regard your Uncle Mark apart from the money question? That is what I should like to have settled."

"Well, what do you say about it, girls?" asked Sydney.

"We have always known that he could help us if he wanted to," said Elsie. "But if he doesn't want to, it would be rather nice to see him, all the same."

"Yes, I think that," said Rose. "We have so few relations."

"I beg your pardon, Rose," said her mother. "I am quite aware that the relations on *my* side of the family are looked down upon. One of them, it is true, has come forward in the most generous way to offer help and assistance which has *not* been offered by the sole relation on your father's side. But that is not the point." She did not proceed to explain what the point was, it having slipped her memory for the moment, and in the pause that followed Sydney said: "Far be it from us to look down upon our solid and helpful Cousin Henry, mother. What do you think about it, Bobby and Billy?"

"I don't look down on Cousin Henry," said Billy. "He sent me half a sovereign at Christmas."

"If we made friends with Uncle Mark, perhaps he would send us a sovereign," said Bobby.

"The oracle again!" said their father. "No, it isn't quite possible to regard Uncle Mark altogether apart from the money question. He wouldn't expect us to. Let's be honest about it. What he was going to do for me when I was a young man included providing money amongst other things; and that was always taken for granted between us. What he would have given me he doesn't want for himself, and we were on such terms that taking money from him meant no more than taking affection. Still, it was the affection I missed more than the money at first. He had mine. There would still be some for him if he wanted it, after all these years."

"If I may be allowed to express an opinion," said Mrs. Conway, still in some offence at having had her last speech cut short, "I should say let byegones be byegones. If *I* can overlook the past, surely others can. If Uncle Mark comes here I shall refer in no way to what is over and done with. The slate shall be wiped clean. We will make a fresh start."

This handsome surrender seemed to put the matter on a very high plane. But further discussion failed to discover any likelihood of Uncle Mark's coming to Watermeads as a result of his meeting with Fred, or indeed of anything arising out of the meeting. The Conway family went to bed a trifle depressed, and it speaks well for their general amiability that no-one felt inclined to blame Fred for not having made more of the opportunity, unless it was Mrs. Conway, upon whom the light treatment of so serious a subject as drunkenness still sat heavily.

But the next morning the slight depression, which

had already disappeared, was replaced by a most grateful exhilaration. The post brought a letter from Uncle Mark to his nephew, which ran as follows:

"My Dear Sydney,

"I fear I have been a trifle remiss in my correspondence lately, but the effect of increasing age upon me is that I talk more and write less. Your boy may have mentioned to you that we came across one another a few nights ago. He does not seem to have the brains that you possessed at his age, but I should like to see more of him. Perhaps we shall take to one another; perhaps we shan't. But we might try. Will you ask him to dine with me on Thursday at the Wanderers' Club at 8 o'clock? I hope all goes well with you in the bucolic existence you have chosen. I still think it was a mistake on your part to give up the parliamentary career in which you might possibly have shone; but every man to his taste, and there are no doubt ample compensations to be gained from a quiet life in the country.

"Your affectionate uncle

"Mark Drake."

So there was the olive branch held out at last! The way of holding it out was Uncle Mark's own, and in the end was not misunderstood. If he chose to assume that it was his nephew's own choice to give up his career, that was only putting the long past disturbance aside in a way that would not reflect upon himself. The concession might be made to him without any difficulty. And it was just as easy to read between the lines in other respects. Without a doubt he had 'taken to' Fred. Probably he had been moved to some affectionate remembrance of Fred's father at the same

age, and was ready to go much further on the road to complete reconciliation than appeared on the surface of his letter. At any rate the lever was ready to Fred's hand by which reconciliation could be brought about. It rested with him to use it.

Here then was yet another instance of Fred's luck. It seemed to Elsie and Rose that the family fortunes positively must be mended by him sooner or later, with all the chances that a watchful providence was holding out to him. Cousin Henry and his prospective offer of partnership might fail, but Cousin Henry no longer held the fate of Watermeads entirely in his hands. Uncle Mark was once more a factor to be hopefully taken into account. And even if Uncle Mark failed, there was the heiress. Fred had fallen in love with an heiress—the very thing that Elsie and Rose had wished might happen, but could hardly have expected to happen so promptly and satisfactorily. As they made the beds together they talked happily of the bright days that were coming. Freddy had not disappointed them. Freddy was going to do it all, by one means or another.

And in the meantime, the present immediate days were bright enough. Fred's home-coming alone created an air of holiday, which was enhanced by the continuous perfection of the June weather. Today there was to be a cricket match on the ground in the park. Fred had got up a team, to play the town of Sherbrook. It would include cricketers from neighbouring country houses, and those who would come to look on would make of it quite a festive occasion. Watermeads could still supply a tent in which to enter-

tain private friends on the cricket field; and with fruit and flowers from the garden, cakes made in the house, and milk and cream from their own cows, the Conways could manage a tea-party quite in the old style, and with very little expense.

The prospect was one of unadulterated pleasure. Everybody liked coming to Watermeads, because the Conways were so pleased to see everybody, and with their limited resources entertained them so well. The poverty would be in abeyance on such an occasion as this. Except that there would be no 'cups' or other alcoholic drinks for the men, the entertainment would not differ from any that would be provided by a richer house for a similar affair. There would be the cricket to watch, in the beautiful park. under the fair June sky; tennis and croquet on the lawns; and the lovely overgrown garden for those who preferred to wander about it. There was also the fact that the unusual state to which this fairly ancient and highly respectable county family had been reduced, and the way in which they stood up against it, would provide ample material for conversation to a large proportion of their visitors. It was more interesting to go to Watermeads and talk about what was happening there than to go to other houses. But the Conways did not take this into account. They had plenty to offer without that.

Fred was up at six o'clock on Saturday morning. Even if there had not been a great deal to do in the way of preparation for the day, he would have been out early. It was a pure joy to him, after his confined life in London, to taste the freedom of his home.

His love for Watermeads was greater every time he came back to it. Of all the family he felt its charm most. There was growing up in him a strong desire to get it back to what it had been, to cherish it, to make his life there, even if it should take him years to do it. Whether or no Cousin Henry was right in charging him with a lack of business initiative, which alone could bring him what he desired from his work, his work was none the less done with an end always in view, and done as well as he was able to do it. It was this that chiefly upheld him in a life that was essentially uncongenial, and it was giving him a steadiness of character that was hardly native to him.

The cricket pitch was got ready by other members of the club, but the Watermeads tent had to be put up, and the lawns got ready for games. It had long been necessary for the Conways to do all that sort of thing for themselves. The gardener and his assistant had their hands full with more serious matters, and could not be taken away from their work, except to lend an occasional hand. So Fred and Bobby and Billy worked hard until breakfast time, and their father helped them energetically for a time, and then went off to do something else.

At breakfast Uncle Mark's letter came, and afterwards they went to work again with heightened energy. The cricket was to begin at half past ten, and there was a lot more to do than Fred had anticipated. The croquet and tennis lawns had been cut, but badly wanted rolling as well as freshly marking. So the whole family, with the exception of Mrs. Conway, fastened themselves on to the heavy roller from the

cricket ground and brought it with great labour into the garden; and here they were joined by Bellamy, who had come up to see if he could do anything to help. People were always willing to help the Conway family to do anything that had to be done; they were always willing to help themselves, though their habit was to put off whatever wanted doing until almost the last moment.

Fred and Bellamy had not met before. They looked at one another and liked one another. Fred showed it by being more than usually gay and talkative, Bellamy perhaps not at all, as he spoke no more than was his habit, and seldom smiled. But the feeling of liking was there, and when he went off with Elsie to mix and fetch the whitewash, she said to him, all smiles: "It *is* jolly to have Freddy home," sure that he would sympathise with her in her pleasure, even if he did not do so by speech.

But he looked down at her and smiled his grave smile. "I wish I was as young as he is," he said.

She did not know quite what to make of this. He had seemed old to her at first, chiefly because he wore a beard and was so very silent and serious. But gradually she, and Rose too, had come to accept him as of their generation rather than that of their parents. He was, in fact, not over thirty. "Why do you want to be younger?" she asked.

"I was happier when I was Fred's age," he said, in a tone that closed the subject, but also caused her to feel that she had received a confidence.

When they returned to the tennis court with a bucket of whitewash and the marker, they found the

roller in the middle of the croquet lawn motionless, and an addition to the group round it. "Oh, it's Jack Kirby," said Elsie. "I wonder why he has come over so early."

It seemed from his own account that Jack Kirby had come over an hour before the time fixed for the match in which he was to play, to see if he could do anything to help. But he did not seem best pleased when he was asked to lend a hand with the roller. He took one turn up and down the croquet lawn, and then rested, while the other three men and the two boys went back to the other end. When they returned he was helping Elsie and Rose to mark the tennis court, with his coat off, and such an air of being just the person wanted for that job that there could be no suggestion of his taking on the other again.

He was a cheerful looking, rather loud and confident speaking young man of medium height. A student of heredity and environment might have seen in him the outcome of a very ordinary stock tuned up to a higher pitch by the influence of wealth and consequent social facilities. But it would only be fair to say that the freedom and confidence of his manners were as natural to him as to those whose assured position arose not from wealth alone. He had had exactly the same training, and effectually the same surroundings. There was scarcely any society in which he would not have been accepted at his own valuation; he had never had to struggle to get where he was, and took everything that came to him as a matter of right. Absence of breeding was latent, but not apparent; or at least so little apparent that only

a somewhat hostile critic would have seen the signs of it.

Such a critic, however, seemed to exist in the person of Bellamy, who eyed him with marked disfavour as the roller was brought heavily up to where the tennis court adjoined the croquet lawn. He said nothing, however, until much later, when he was again alone with Elsie for a few minutes. This was when the crowd was beginning to gather for the cricket match. Mrs. Conway's guests would not arrive until the afternoon, but the Sherbrook team was on the ground, and Fred's side had already gathered, with a few of the more enthusiastic onlookers. Jack Kirby alone amongst the cricketers was not in the group around the club tent. He was to be seen between the garden and the park, talking vivaciously to Rose, as if cricket were quite an unimportant part of the day's proceedings, and he had come over to Watermeads merely for some hours of friendly intercourse.

"That young man seems to think the world was made for him," said Bellamy.

Elsie threw a glance at his face, which was turned towards the unconscious couple with no very amiable expression, and looked down again quickly. She had never seen him look like that and speak like that before, and had nothing to say in reply. He made no further remark, but turned towards the tents, and they walked back to them together.

CHAPTER VII

AT THE CRICKET MATCH

Fred's side was made up of half a dozen good cricketers and a somewhat lengthy tail. It included his father and his young brothers, who had been looking forward to this great day with alternate strong hopes and desperate fears. The star was the Reverend Edward Probert, an Oxford University, and County cricketer, who had quite lately been appointed to a neighbouring rectory. This was his first appearance at Watermeads.

Early in the afternoon Mrs. Conway's guests assembled. That lady was in the mood to enjoy herself as much as anybody on the ground. The poverty of Watermeads was for the time being put aside; she took her place once more as an entertainer of her equals, and what she had to offer them was equal to the day. Her own idea of herself was that the success of such an entertainment rested upon her own shoulders; but she unconsciously relied so much upon the qualities of her family that she had no qualms about the enjoyment of her guests, and was able to devote herself to the few whom she was really pleased to see.

One of these was Lady Sophia Raine, who had married at about the same age as herself. Colonel Raine was Squire of Rockhanger, the nearest large house

to Watermeads, and the two young wives had been a good deal together in the days when there was some equality in the conditions of their respective houses. If Mrs. Conway had always been something of an oddity, so had Lady Sophia. She was immensely interested in everybody else's business, but most of all interested in her own rendering of their stories. She was a great artist in gossip, and if she had been ill-natured might have worked much mischief; for she could create a full-grown scandal out of the most meagre material, and her stories were always rounded and complete. She had an unfailing eye for character, where it concerned her art, and had made many of her most brilliant successes by deducing from her own observation what people would be likely to do, when information as to what they actually had done might be lacking. But in her personal intercourse she was strangely wanting in discrimination. Almost anyone with whom she was thrown into contact was the same to her—a pair of ears to hear with. She had never seen the absurdities in Mrs. Conway's speech and behaviour when they were young women together, and had grown accustomed to her as an intimate neighbour; so that the friendship was hardly diminished when Watermeads began to drop out of the running with other country houses. If she saw her now with different eyes, it was because Mrs. Conway had become a character in a story; but that did not affect her when the story was not under discussion. With all her own oddities she was kind-hearted. She was sorry for her old companion, and did many little things to ease the conditions under which she lived.

The chief of them was that she never made any difference in her behaviour towards her. Consequently, Mrs. Conway regarded her with some warmth of feeling; if she could be said to have a friend, it was Lady Sophia Raine.

When Lady Sophia came on to the ground, the Reverend Edward Probert was batting for Fred's side, and by the time she and Mrs. Conway had settled themselves to their comfortable talk, he also was settled at the wicket, and was running up a most satisfactory score. He was a good-looking young man of twenty-eight or so, and batted with a freedom and skill that made it a pleasure to watch him.

He was the text for Lady Sophia's first discourse. She surveyed him through her tortoise-shell lorgnettes and found him good to look upon. "I've thought of him for one of your girls," she said. "Elsie, I suppose it must be, as young Kirby seems to be taken with Rose. I'll get them together as soon as possible, or he'll be snapped up. We've got such a lot of girls all about the place, and not enough young men to go round. If I had girls of my own I might not be so generous. As it is I'll do what I can for yours."

Mrs. Conway began to say that nothing was further from her thoughts than——

"Mr. Probert is an acquisition to the neighbourhood," continued Lady Sophia. "He is the only son of Sir Vivian Probert, and will come in for a fine property by and by. Sir Vivian is only forty-nine; he married young—one of the Bunts of Lincolnshire —I believe they're not very happy; they say she drinks, but I don't believe it; more likely to be drugs

if it's anything at all. But they say it of everybody. They say it of me, you know. It will probably be years before this young man succeeds, but in the meantime Lutterbourne is as good as anyone could want. It is worth about four hundred a year, but that doesn't matter in his case. Sir Vivian is as rich as Croesus; coal mines, besides a good landed property. Lutterbourne Rectory is almost like a Squire's house. It wouldn't be very far from you, either. I'll do what I can."

Mrs. Conway gathered herself for an effort. She had many things to say and wanted to give them due weight. But before she could begin Probert was brilliantly caught out in the slips, and the subsequent mild excitement extended itself to Lady Sophia, who missed the opening of Mrs. Conway's speech, and interrupted it when it was well under weigh to exclaim: "Why, who on earth's that? I know his face as well as I know my own."

It was Bellamy going in to bat. Mrs. Conway, knowing from long experience that no word of her speech would be listened to if Lady Sophia's attention was fixed elsewhere, relinquished it to say: "That is a Mr. Bellamy—an artist who has taken rooms in the village. He appears to be a gentlemanlike sort of a man, for an artist, and Sydney made friends with him when he first came. Sydney makes friends with all sorts, and I sometimes wonder——"

"Bellamy! Why, of course it is!" exclaimed Lady Sophia. "It was the beard that deceived me for the moment. Geoffrey Bellamy! An *artist*, did you say?"

"He paints pictures of the scenery," said Mrs.

Conway. "I have not seen any of them, and cannot tell whether they are good pictures or not. We get many artists here in summer time, and——"

"No, I don't suppose he *would* show you his pictures," said Lady Sophia. "He's no more an artist than I am. Geoffrey Bellamy! An artist indeed! Now whatever can *he* be doing, living in rooms in an out of the way village? Really, Jane, this is very interesting. Have you seen much of him? Does he take an interest in either of the girls? If he does, I should stop it, if I were you. Heaven knows I'm not particular, but—— Oh, well, if you haven't recognised him, as I see you haven't, surely you can remember the Case?"

Mrs. Conway did not remember the Case, and Lady Sophia recounted it to her.

"The Bellamys are very good people in Cumberland," she said. "But nobody knew much about them till this young man ran away with young Ralph Pringle's wife. It was a very bad case—not the running away, which unfortunately one has had to get used to in so many cases, but what went before it. The two young men had been friends—in the same regiment, I fancy, and—oh, well, I can't remember all the details, but it all came out at the trial and made a very bad impression. I was there on the last day; that's why I recognised the man. Unfortunately it was over sooner than had been anticipated, and I hardly heard anything; or I should have remembered. But I can look it up. Anyhow, he married the girl afterwards and disappeared. That's why I had forgotten all about him. Now, apparently, he's left her. But an

artist! Has *any*body seen Mr. Bellamy's pictures since he has been here?"

"I have," piped a small voice from behind Mrs. Conway's chair. "He lets me clean his brushes in turpentine."

Lady Sophia jumped in her seat. "Good gracious, child!" she exclaimed. "How long have you been there? What did you hear me saying?"

"I've only just come," said Penelope. "I heard you ask if anybody had seen Mr. Bellamy's pictures."

Lady Sophia leaned back in her chair and breathed relief. Mrs. Conway upon whose slow-moving brain the story she had heard was only just beginning to make an impression, ordered Penelope off with more asperity than she was wont to assume towards her, but explained to Lady Sophia that the child would not have understood anything that had been said if she had happened to overhear it.

"If there is anything that I dislike more than another," she said, "it is any suspicion of impropriety. I own that I should never have expected it in the case of Mr. Bellamy, who looks to me too solemn and serious for anything of the sort. I suppose I am too confiding. People are brought to the house, and I am expected to accept them and treat them with whatever hospitality is still possible in our unfortunately reduced circumstances. I sometimes wonder——"

Lady Sophia had been watching Bellamy batting during the progress of this speech. He had just cut a ball to the boundary in a very pretty style, and she

exclaimed: "Does *that* look like an artist? Now I wonder what on earth the man can be masquerading here for. If it's your pretty Rose he's after, Jane, I should put a stop to it as soon as possible. I was told that he was a very amusing man at the time of the trial. But really, one has to draw the line somewhere, and with young girls about I should draw it at Geoffrey Bellamy if I were you."

"Now you have told me what sort of a man he is, and the disgraceful story attached to him," said Mrs. Conway, "I shall certainly refuse to admit him to——"

"Ah, here are Lord and Lady Kirby," said Lady Sophia, "being *far* the most important people in the County, of course they must make a sort of state entry about an hour after the rest of us. I don't think I can bear the effulgence of their presence. I will go and talk to somebody else."

Lord and Lady Kirby hardly deserved this scathing satire. Having got rid of their numerous guests, they had taken an hour's motor-run because they liked being together. Nor were they open to the charge of giving themselves high airs. They enjoyed their wealth and they enjoyed their consequence; but they were ready to share their good things with all and sundry. Although they had been 'climbers' in the early days of their social career, they had long since reached the eminence upon which they felt comfortable, and had no idea of lessening their enjoyment of life by narrowing their circle. It was actually Lady Sophia who had tried to play the great lady over Lady Kirby, and she was *piqued* because the

Kirbys had shown that neither her countenance nor its absence made any difference to them.

Lord Kirby was a plebeian-looking man of sixty, strong and vigorous, and hearty in his manners. It had been said of him in the City of London, where he had made a great position for himself and piled up a great fortune, that his free and open way had been a considerable asset to him; that it had made men trust him where he was not altogether to be trusted, and that it misrepresented his character, which was as hard as a stone. There was some truth in this, but it was not all true. None of it was true with regard to his personal relationships. He liked people, and was generous towards them; and since he had attained his present position he had had no private axe to grind.

Lady Kirby was a pleasant mediocre woman, with a great zest for life and movement. She was easy to amuse, and her laugh was infectious. She was bulky in figure, and dressed herself elaborately. She had a smile for everybody, but made few friends. She admired her husband intensely, and her son hardly less, and both of them made much of her, not only in private but in public.

Jack Kirby, for instance, came straight to her when she had seated herself beside Mrs. Conway, but she sent him away again almost immediately. "I don't want *you*," she said. "I'm going to have a talk with Mrs. Conway. You go and amuse yourself with somebody else. There are lots of pretty girls here for you to talk to, and there's the prettiest of all of them with an empty chair at her side."

He had himself only just vacated the empty chair by the side of Rose, and now went back to it. Lady Kirby looked after him fondly. "I do like Jack to have really nice girls to make friends with," she said. "It's always a good thing for a young man. And I like your two so much, Mrs. Conway. Dear girls, I call them. I wish you'd let me take them back with me this evening, and keep them till Monday. There are some nice young people in the house, and we could find them some fun. Will you?"

This was the kind of invitation that had to be fenced with. Long practice had given Mrs. Conway the ability to judge at once whether acceptance was possible, and, if it was not, to proffer the best excuse. So many things had to be thought of. Clothes, of course, were the chief. Elsie and Rose had had arrears of income paid up, and a present given them besides. Their wardrobes were in course of replenishment, but were not yet up to the requisite pitch. Tips to servants, means of getting to and fro—all the little accidents of expense that those who gave the invitations never considered had to be considered by those who wished to accept them. Mrs. Conway saw at once that this invitation could not be accepted.

"You are very kind, Lady Kirby," she said, "but my eldest son is at home, and as he so seldom gets a holiday with us away from his work I think the girls would prefer to stay with him."

"Oh, but couldn't he come too?" Lady Kirby pressed her facile hospitality, looking about her all the time, while Mrs. Conway made her ponderous speeches of reply. "Oh, well," she said at last; "if

they can't come to sleep, will you let them come to lunch tomorrow and stay to dine? We'll fetch them and send them back. Now, don't say no to that, *please,* Mrs. Conway."

Mrs. Conway did not say no, nor entirely yes. The girls might go over to lunch, with Fred; it was very kind of Lady Kirby; she thought they had better not stay to dine; but it was extremely kind of her all the same. Lady Kirby left it at that, and, being rather tired of Mrs. Conway by this time, skilfully inserted her husband into the seat she had occupied, and went off to talk and laugh with somebody else.

Lord Kirby was quite ready to make himself agreeable to his hostess for the time that courtesy demanded, and for rather longer if her society should turn out agreeable to him. It was the first time he had met Mrs. Conway. He thought her an attractive woman. Her manners were stiffer and more stately than quite suited him, but she seemed willing to unbend to him personally, which flattered him a little. If he had ever heard of the extreme poverty that had overtaken Watermeads he had forgotten it. The Conways bulked as important people in his eyes, because they lived in a very large house, and had lived there for generations. In spite of his new peerage he was quite ready to give honour to such people, and, in spite of his wealth, he did not consider their dignity lessened by an absence of it. The Conways were hard up—he did know as much as that—but so were lots of people in their position. As he himself was so very far from being hard up the contrast was not altogether ungratifying, and he was ready to do any-

thing that lay in his power to ease matters for the young people, whom he liked, as he liked everything that tended towards gaiety and freshness.

He had taken a great fancy to Rose, which caused him to be rather more watchful of Jack's movements with regard to her than would otherwise have been natural to him; for Jack liked making friends with pretty girls, and had not hitherto devoted himself so much to any particular one as to give rise to expectations for the future. But Lord Kirby thought that this little Conway girl was beginning to be more of an attraction than other girls, and he had come to Watermeads with an idea of getting to know a bit more about her people and her surroundings. He would rather have had Jack marry amongst the high aristocracy, but failing that he was ready to welcome almost any girl as a daughter-in-law, so long as she was a lady, young and pretty, and affectionate towards himself. Rose possessed the first three qualifications, and, as for the last, she had behaved very nicely to him when she had come over to Prittlewell with her brother and sister, and he thought that he might easily bring himself to love her as a daughter, if Jack should make her his choice. The fact is that Lord Kirby would have exchanged a surprisingly large proportion of the wealth he had made for a daughter of his own, and was anxious for the time to come when his son would bring some nice girl to him and ask him to accept her as one. With this idea always in his mind he was disposed to observe Mrs. Conway somewhat closely, as one who might come to be in close relationship to him by and by.

There was something in her speech that he did not quite understand; she was half assertive and half apologetic. The assertiveness seemed to belong to her, and he was ready to accept it. The apology did not, and it was some time before he gathered what she was apologising for. He found out when, after a stroll round that part of the garden near the cricket field, he asked if he might see the house. Houses interested him; and he had heard that there were some fine pictures at Watermeads.

Mrs. Conway led the way indoors with proud humility. Her attitude was of one ready to unbare all wounds, and even to parade them. She made Lord Kirby feel uncomfortable. He had had an idea of asking if he might have a whiskey and soda when they should reach some room in which the request would not seem indecent. He was hot and thirsty after his drive. But if his hosts were as poor as Mrs. Conway was insisting on, it would have seemed indecent anywhere. He had the feeling, too, so disagreeable to a rich man, that pride of wealth was being fixed upon him. "This is all very dreadful to you, no doubt; but make nothing of it. Hug your riches by all means; but as for me, I despise them." That was how Mrs. Conway seemed to be addressing him, as she led him through the rooms which showed by scores of little signs how low the Conway estate had fallen. He was not allowed to admire anything without being made to appear as if he were making the best of a bad job out of politeness, and was being seen through. From inclining to admire Mrs. Conway with her stiff stately manners, he jumped to the other extreme of

disliking her almost ferociously. He mopped his brow as he emerged once more into the sunlight, though it was hot out of doors, and he had been cool within, and went off at once to solace himself with the society of his wife as a relief from what he had undergone.

"That's an awful woman," he said to her later on, when they were motoring home together. "You hear about people being purse-proud, but she seems to be empty-purse-proud, and I don't know that that isn't worse. If people are as hard up as that they ought to hide it."

"It's such a nuisance," acquiesced Lady Kirby. "One might do a lot for the young people, but she always makes you feel that you're taking something from them instead of giving it, if you ask them to do anything."

"I like the young people, and especially that pretty little Rose," said Lord Kirby. "I know Jack is smitten with her, and she's just the sort of nice little girl I should like to see him marry, if her people were all right. Of course they ought to be, with that great place there,—but I don't know; they might be always sponging on one. Mrs. Conway gives herself all the airs in the world, but she gives you the idea that she would take what she could get, too. Upon my word, I felt inclined to say to her once or twice: 'Well, if a fiver would be of any use to you——!'"

He laughed heartily at his own wit. "I shouldn't worry about Jack," said Lady Kirby. "He likes playing with the little thing when he's down here. I doubt if he ever gives her a thought at other times."

CHAPTER VIII

POSSIBILITIES

As Mrs. Conway had declared that Bellamy should not enter her house again, it was rather unfortunate that her husband should have invited him to supper after the match, and should have omitted to tell her so until he actually appeared.

Bellamy came into the hall looking very grave and very dignified; and so much *not* the sort of person to have been the hero of the unsavoury story recounted by Lady Sophia that Mrs. Conway recoiled before the effort of dismissing him summarily, and contented herself with an extremely cold, not to say forbidding, reception. Bellamy looked surprised for a moment, but Mrs. Conway was given to moods, and he had had experience of them already. The family in general was happy and talkative, and the fact that the hostess sat grimly silent in her place and made no effort to entertain the guest, who sat next to her, had less effect upon the gaiety of the meal than might have been expected. Bellamy himself talked more than usual, and actually vouchsafed some information about himself, which he had scarcely ever done before.

He had been at Trinity, it appeared—the Conway college—and at Eton before that. Sydney Conway looked at him with new eyes. This was not the usual training of an artist, and Bellamy had presented him-

self as nothing but an artist at Watermeads. Men educated at Eton, and at Oxford or Cambridge, usually belonged to people whom one should 'know about.' Sydney had 'known about' so many people in his youth, and it was a source of mild pride to him, in his enforced retirement, that he was still in some sort of touch with the world in which names were not merely names, but evoked images. He mentioned Bellamys from Suffolk, tentatively, and this Bellamy replied that they were cousins of sorts, but he did not know any of them. He seemed to be desirous of retiring into his shell again under the pressure of anything like a question about himself, or an attempt to fix him into a social pattern. "I've lived a wandering sort of life since I left Cambridge," he said; "and I've been a lot out of England."

Mrs. Conway broke silence with an accusing glare. "I think you were in the army for a time, were you not, Mr. Bellamy?"

He looked at her in surprise. "No, Mrs. Conway," he said.

"What put that into your head, mother?" enquired Sydney, as she breathed heavily at the reply, and there seemed to be more in the question than appeared on the surface.

"Lady Sophia mentioned Mr. Bellamy to me," she said. "She told me more about him than he has ever told us about himself."

"She probably told you about my elder brother," said Bellamy instantly, "for whom I have sometimes been mistaken."

"She said Geoffrey Bellamy," said Mrs. Conway.

"Yes, that is my brother. My name is Giles."

He went on talking, and gave Mrs. Conway the opportunity of recovering her equanimity. Her wits did not move very fast, and she still thought that there was something very odd about the whole affair, and the sooner it was looked into the better.

Bellamy must have divined the course her thoughts were taking, for he made an opportunity after supper of explaining himself to Sydney Conway. It was a glorious moonlight night, and the whole family was in the garden, with the exception of Mrs. Conway, who did not like the night air, and Penelope, who was in bed.

"I'd better tell you all about myself," he said, "as you've been so kind as to admit me into intimacy here. I've nothing to hide, but——"

"Oh, there's no need to tell me anything," said Sydney lightly. "You're a gentleman. That's enough for me."

Bellamy smiled to himself, but went on: "Mrs. Conway has been told my brother's story," he said, "and she has obviously fixed it on to me. It isn't a very creditable one. He ran way with a brother-officer's wife, and married her after the divorce. As far as I'm concerned, my history has been that of most artists, since I left Cambridge nine years ago. I've lived in Paris and in London, but not much in London. Perhaps the greater part of my time has been spent wandering about Europe, painting."

"Oh, yes, that's all right," said Sydney hastily. "Old Sophia Raine has a very active tongue in her head though. If she's got hold of the idea that you

are the hero of a story, she'll put it about. However, she can be stopped, now we know the truth."

When this conversation was reported to Mrs. Conway later on, she still thought that there was something odd about the whole thing. Had the man said anything about his home, or his family? He had had an expensive education, it was true, and Lady Sophia said that he came from very good people; but here he was, living in two rooms in a cottage, and everybody knew that Mrs. Comberbatch, although honest and clean, was a very indifferent cook. All these things wanted explaining. Had Sydney made any attempt to get the man really to explain himself?

"The fact is, Sydney," said Mrs. Conway, having worked herself into the attitude of combined censure and exposition in which she felt most at her mental ease, "that nobody thinks of anything in this house except myself. Have you ever realised, for instance, that you have two daughters who are grown up? Because I assure you that other people do. Sophia Raine said at once that we ought to be *extremely* careful what men we admit to the house now, and of course she is right, though there was not the slightest necessity to say such a thing to me, as I am *fully* capable of looking after the welfare of my daughters for myself. However, that is not the point. It is quite evident to me that this Mr. Bellamy—artist or no artist—has come here because he is interested in one of the girls, and——"

"Well, mother," Sydney interrupted, "he could hardly have come here for that reason, for he knew nothing at all about us until he had been here a week

—unless we are to suppose that the fame of the girls has gone abroad into all lands, and Bellamy came here to see for himself. That's possible, of course, but——"

"Pray do not treat what I say in that foolish fashion, Sydney," said Mrs. Conway. "You know perfectly well what I mean, and I will not have my words twisted and made a matter for laughter. Are Elsie and Rose of marriageable age, or are they not? That is the point. If you tell me they are not I have nothing more to say. If the contrary, then it is quite clear that it is of great importance to know everything that can be known about the men who are admitted to intimacy with them. Do I make myself clear?"

"Clear as daylight, mother. Which of the girls is Bellamy paying attention to—Elsie, Rose or Penelope? A man doesn't see these things, you know. I'd really no idea that he was paying attention to any of them."

"You mention Penelope, of course, to annoy me, Sydney, as you must be well aware that nothing of the sort is to be expected in connection with her for some years to come. If you had eyes in your head that you could see anything with, it would be perfectly plain to you that it is Elsie that Mr. Bellamy is after."

"I don't quite like the expression of his being 'after' Elsie, mother."

"Like it or not, Sydney, that is what it comes to, and I say now that we have let it go on too long, and it is time to act."

"Well, I don't think it is time to act yet. None of

us have ever thought of such a thing until a few hours ago, and there may be nothing in it at all. If he *is* inclined towards either Elsie or Rose, we shall see it going on, and we can take our line about it. No need to worry yet awhile."

Mrs. Conway breathed deeply. "That is always the way things are done in this house," she said. "Put off—put off—put off! Time enough by and by! Let us sleep and take our ease. And we wake up to find ruin staring us in the face and the mischief past repair."

"That was a good speech, mother, but didn't end quite as well as it began. Well, I should like to know a bit more about Bellamy myself—I mean the sort of place he comes from, and all that. He *is* rather an oyster, it's true, but he strikes me as absolutely straightforward, and of course he's a gentleman. Anybody can see that for themselves. I'll tell you what —I'll ask Uncle Mark about him. He's sure to know, because he knows everything about everybody. It'll be something to write about. I believe Bellamy *is* rather taken with Elsie, now you come to mention it. One ought to find out whatever one can."

The idea that Bellamy was rather taken with Elsie was one which seemed to spring up suddenly from every quarter. To Fred it seemed an obvious one, and he expressed surprise that it had not been suggested to him. It was to Rose that he spoke. Surely the idea must have occurred to her! Why hadn't she said anything about it?

Rose showed the slightest trace of irritation, which was quite unusual with her. "Why can't a man be

friends with us without *that* always being talked about?" she said. "Mr. Bellamy is much too old, for one thing."

Fred laughed at her. "Of course he isn't too old," he said. "You only say that because he has a beard. Most artists have, I believe. Anyhow, he wouldn't be too old for Elsie. She's so sensible."

"*You*'re not, Freddy dear, to say a thing like that," retorted Rose. "It's too bad to call Elsie sensible—at her age. She's no more sensible than I am. Mr. Bellamy is sensible, if you like. I wish he'd mind his own business, instead of——"

"Instead of what?" asked Fred, as she broke off.

"Oh, nothing. But I wish he'd mind his own business."

This was all that he could get out of her, but a little later Penelope announced to Fred that she had heard Mr. Bellamy saying something to Rose about Jack Kirby.

"I couldn't hear what it was," said Penelope, "but Rose said that she thought Jack Kirby was very nice, so that I knew that Mr. Bellamy had said he wasn't."

Information gained in this way could neither be accepted nor extended. Penelope was rebuked for her inveterate habit of prying and listening, and went off quite unmoved by the rebuke, throwing over her shoulder the cryptic remark, "It isn't Elsie, after all; it's Rose. So that makes two of them."

The eyes of the terrible child were known to be preternaturally sharp, but if she meant by this that it was Rose and not Elsie that Bellamy was 'after,' she had made an obvious mistake, misled by super-

ficial appearances, and the novelty of the phenomena to which she was adjusting her observation. Fred thought that it was significant that Bellamy should have shown some jealousy of Jack Kirby. Jack had a way of making himself at home in other people's houses, and, if Bellamy was in process of becoming attached to Elsie, the intimacy to which he had been admitted at Watermeads would seem to him to be attacked when another young man appeared to claim a still greater share of it. It did not matter whether it was Elsie or Rose who was the attraction there, except in the degree of dislike aroused by his free demeanour. Fred felt that nobody could possibly understand these things better than he did, enlightened as his mind had recently become towards affairs of the heart. Bellamy's attitude did not make him like him any the less. He appeared more youthfully human, less like a man of thirty—with a beard—because he was jealous of Jack Kirby making himself at home at Watermeads.

The probability of Bellamy being in love with Elsie, or at least on the way to being in love with her, seemed of considerable importance to Fred—he could not quite tell why, until he thought it all over in church while Mr. Bonner was preaching. Then he decided that it was because Bellamy was older and more serious than either himself or Jack Kirby, and an emotional condition that all three of them shared was seen to involve somewhat momentous consequences. It was a lifting of himself and his two sisters on to a definitely higher plane in the family life of Watermeads. He had hardly as yet come to look upon his own

'affair' as more than a young man's sweet fancy, which might lead to the bliss of an 'engagement.' Farther than that he had hardly looked ahead. Jack Kirby's fancy for Rose had certainly never struck him as more than that. Boys and girls—they fell in love and fell out of it again; they were more youthful, and of an unimportant generation, falling in love with one another than pursuing the ordinary business of their careers. But when a man as old as Bellamy paid suit to a girl, it meant marriage, not dalliance out of which marriage might come.

So there they were, the three of them, Elsie, Rose and himself, no longer the children whom their parents' handling of affairs carried along wherever it might be, but players taking an active part in the game for themselves. It put the whole difficult and absorbing question of Watermeads and its future in a new light.

The marriage of Elsie or of Rose, or of both of them, could have no direct bearing upon the fate of Watermeads; but indirectly it would be of some importance. Even to Fred, the gradual decline of consideration in which the Conways as a once important County family were held was plain enough. As long as they lived at Watermeads they were still 'somebodies'—at or about Watermeads. Away from it, as his own experience had shown him, they now amounted to very little. And their poverty and difficulties were increasing, to a point at which a marriage for either of the girls amongst the people to whom they belonged might come to be considered almost a misalliance. As they grew older, the differences between

them and their neighbours were becoming more and more marked, and if their way of living declined much further from the accepted standard there might come a time when it would be irksome to them to keep up any pretence of equality. Fred had begun to see these things, even if, as he hoped, his sisters did not see them; and they troubled him intermittently.

But now such forebodings seemed uncalled for, and they were far from his thoughts on this Sunday morning. Bellamy was in love with Elsie—or, at least, it looked like it—and Jack Kirby was in love with Rose. More than was known at present was to be found out about Bellamy's standing, but his manners and appearance and his educational record left no doubt in Fred's easy mind that whatever should be found out about him in addition would show him to be of the right quality for an alliance with the Conways. As for Jack Kirby—he was the match of the neighbourhood. Rose would be Lady Kirby some day, in command of unlimited wealth, and, what was better still, Watermeads' nearest important neighbour. Fred felt a great increase of years and weight accruing to him as he looked into the future. He had not before translated Jack Kirby's gratifying attentions into such tangible happenings, but in the light of Bellamy's attentions it was natural now so to regard them.

As for himself, that sweet fair-haired blue-eyed Freda was the girl for him, whether she was rich or poor, high-born or otherwise. But since, as it had happened, she was an 'heiress' in addition to her other delightful qualities, it might be that all the crowding difficulties in connection with Watermeads

and its future would be happily resolved by his marriage to her. The thought was an added source of gratitude towards the dear girl for all that she had shown to him of charm and sympathy. How happy they would be together, if the almost intolerable bliss of acceptance should be granted to him! Here his thoughts left the path of economic anticipation, and wandered off into the flowery meadows of memory and longing, while the Rector droned on with his sermon, and a bee which had strayed into the cool church sang in much the same tone the glories of the summer world outside, and its disapproval of the flowers with which Elsie's and Rose's new hats were trimmed.

Whatever drawbacks in the way of lack of money Elsie and Rose may have had to overcome, they suffered none from lack of taste. They were as prettily attired as any of the girls who made part of the large company gathered at Prittlewell, and the consciousness of being for once well turned out gave them the necessary assurance. Fred was proud of his sisters as he saw them taking their bright part in all the gaiety and laughter that went on over the luncheon table, and afterwards in the games that went on in the garden. It seemed to him that Rose was by far the prettiest girl of them all, and also that she was receiving the most attention. As far as the young men were concerned, the attention was not allowed to become unduly marked from anyone except Jack Kirby, who devoted himself to her in a way that Fred thought he had never done before. It was his father who alone rivalled him. Lord Kirby seemed to be laying himself out to show in what high esteem Rose was

held at Prittlewell. His face was admiring and even proprietary as he regarded her, and it must have been plain to everybody that Rose was the girl out of all those present upon whom his liking and his hopes were settled.

The day was a veritable triumph for Rose. Events seemed to be moving almost too fast. Fred grew a little alarmed at what was going on under his eyes. The idea of marriage being so much in his mind, it seemed to him that its structure was rearing itself on foundations that were hardly yet strong enough to bear it. Supposing Lord Kirby to want it and to anticipate it, had Jack yet reached the point at which *he* wanted it? And was Rose ready for it yet? He had been witness of all the meetings between them hitherto, and they had been actually very few, although as far as it went the intimacy had established itself very quickly. They liked one another: that was obvious. But Jack did not appear to him to have got past the point which in his own case had been reached long before he had had any idea of anything like real love-making; and he doubted whether Rose would not be surprised and somewhat flustered if she were invited to declare herself. It might even 'put her off' Jack Kirby altogether. At her age, she could hardly be expected to weigh the great advantages of such a match, nor did it fit in with his view of his sister that she should do so. Jack must make his way with her just as any young man would do —as he himself hoped he was doing with Freda, to whom he had nothing to offer except himself.

The three of them were sent home in a car after

dinner. They were all a trifle exalted by the gaiety they had enjoyed, so different in its surroundings of wealth and ease from the quieter pleasures of their own home. But after they had chattered and laughed among themselves for a time, they fell silent. Moving rapidly through the sweet summer night, Fred's thoughts returned to the perennial subject of Watermeads. The moonlit meadows, the glint of gently-flowing waters, the dim mystery of the woods, stole with enchantment into his spirit. The beauty of this well-loved country was summed up to him in his home, surrounded by it, but maimed in its power of evoking pleasure by the shadow of poverty that lay over it all. If they could live at Watermeads as they lived at Prittlewell! Watermeads would be even better than Prittlewell, if there were money to keep it up with, and to enable its owners to entertain their friends there. Prittlewell was too much the country home of people who were not of descent or by temperament country people. Nor was Prittlewell nearly so attractive a place as Watermeads, even in its state of decay, still less as it might be made, if the money that was lavished on Prittlewell were available.

Well, perhaps there was a brighter day dawning for Watermeads. Fred sat between his sisters bathed in a glow of hope and happiness. He did not examine into the springs of his feeling. It was enough for him that he was young, and hope was a natural outcome of his youth, and the general way in which the world seemed to be ordered. Some changes, at least, were coming, and it was not too much to take it for granted that they would lead to desired goals.

The necessity of giving five shillings to the *chauffeur*, who received the tip with the slightly scornful indifference of his class, rather dashed his spirits. Having been moving on a plane in which a tip of five shillings had no more significance to the donor than the price of a stamp or a newspaper, and projecting his mind forward to the time in which that pleasant state of things would be as illustrative of life at Watermeads as of life at Prittlewell, it was irksome to be reminded that the time was not yet, and five shillings was still the price of something that would have to be gone without. It also suddenly came home to him that his holiday was over, and that Cousin Henry's expectations as to what was due from him would necessitate an uncomfortably early start on the morrow. And he wanted to say a word or two to Elsie alone, but did not suppose that it would be possible to get her without Rose, or at least without letting Rose see that it was she whom he wanted to say the word or two about.

But when they had entered the house by a door in the back premises, Rose slipped off upstairs as he was busy with lock and bolts, and Elsie remained behind.

How *did* Rose feel about Jack Kirby? Wasn't it pretty obvious now that it was all coming along fast? Was she ready for a declaration from him if it should come? Those were the questions he put to Elsie as they moved slowly along the echoing passages, their bedroom candlesticks in their hands.

"Oh, I don't know, Freddy dear," said Elsie, with a slightly puzzled frown on her pretty face. "I think she likes him, but she doesn't talk to me about it."

"Doesn't talk to you about it!" It was the one thing that he would have thought they *would* have talked about together just now, since they had always talked together about everything.

"Do you think *he* means anything?" she asked him in return.

He played with the question. He felt, somehow, that Jack was likely to go a good deal further on the road of paying attentions to a pretty girl without asking himself whither the road led than he himself would do. "I should say he was pretty well in love with her," he ended, rather weakly.

It seemed that Elsie, with none of his experience to guide her, had come to much the same conclusion as he had. "I couldn't say yet whether I thought he meant anything or not," she said.

He was inclined to combat the doubt, thus plainly expressed, and strengthened his previous statement. "I believe he's head over ears in love with her," he said. "And old Kirby loves her too. I'm pretty certain *he* wants it."

"Oh, yes, I think he does," said Elsie, with large indifference. "But that wouldn't count for much. I'll let you know, Freddy dear, if anything happens. I should think Jack would be coming over here to-morrow. He doesn't go back to London till Tuesday. We really *must* go to bed now. I'll call you at five o'clock.

CHAPTER IX

OLIVIA

Olivia Bonner sat at the open window of her bedroom. It was very early in the morning. The human world was asleep all about her, but the amazing world of nature was in clamorous life in the dewy spaces of the Vicarage garden on to which she was looking. She drank in the sweet sights and sounds and scents, and thought she could never have enough of them.

She had reached her father's house only the evening before. She had been away from it for the years that had changed her from girlhood into womanhood. She had devoted herself to the whims of a querulous, pleasure-seeking woman, whom she had thought at least to have loved her. But Lady Bridgeworth had grown tired of her niece, as she had tired of everything—people, places and pursuits—and Olivia had been returned to her father, carriage handsomely paid, to adjust herself as best she could to a life as different as possible from that which she had been leading for three years past.

She had purposely put off this necessary process of adjustment until the disturbances of farewells and subsequent journeyings should be over. She had to think it all over for herself; it was not in her nature to take this, or any great change in circumstance, lightly. As she had taken seriously her part of providing companionship and sympathy for her widowed aunt, when

her father had regretfully given her up to her, so now she took seriously the part that it would be hers to play in her father's house, to which she had returned for good. And first she wanted to ask herself, and get the question off her mind, whether there had been anything lacking in herself that had made her aunt take leave of her with hardly less, though more concealed, pleasure than that with which she had first welcomed her.

Lady Bridgeworth was the Vicar's half-sister—nearly thirty years younger than himself. Her husband had been in diplomacy, and she had led just the life that suited her during the ten years of her marriage. His appointments had been only in the larger European capitals, and when he had been promoted to be Minister to a South American State, she had lingered behind in Rome, unable to bring herself to accompany him. His death, within a few weeks of his taking up his new appointment, had upset her terribly. She was full of remorse at having allowed him to go out without her, and at having cherished a growing determination that she would not go out to him at all, if she could find the right progression of excuses. In this mood Olivia had first found her, and she had set herself to distract her mind and to raise her from the unwholesome state of depression in which she was sunk. She had thought herself to be successful, and the consciousness of duty well done had upheld her through an unquiet year, in which nothing she enjoyed made up to her for the loss of her English home and her father's dear companionship. But now, looking back, she doubted whether she had really had

much to do with her aunt's recovery. She had perhaps assisted in her return to health by refusing to let her regard herself as a permanent invalid, but that return might have been brought about without her by the zest which Lady Bridgeworth had in her for life, and above all for amusement. At least, during the nearly two years that had since elapsed, their tastes had diverged more and more. The young girl, so much the more gifted and attractive of the two, had felt increasing distaste for a life of nothing but change and amusement; and the older woman had thrown off by degrees, and at last come definitely to fight against, anything that she had at first accepted that could relieve the senseless round of gaiety she was now strong enough to enjoy once more. She was sick of pictures and churches, sick of reading anything but the least intelligent novels, sick of music, except of the lightest sort, sick of society that took account of anything but the rapid froth of intercourse which alone she was fitted to enjoy. Olivia's society became irksome to her. Olivia could be gay and bright: she had at first seemed to her aunt the incarnation of bright youth, and had reacted wonderfully on her own state of depression. But there was an undercurrent of seriousness in her, and there was none in Lady Bridgeworth, whose melancholy was of time and circumstance, to be fought against as a disagreeable state of mind when pressure was withdrawn. Olivia's dark eyes were a constant reproach to her frivolity, when frivolity once more became the guiding factor of her life. She had to be always pretending; and she hated the trouble of it.

Olivia now saw, as she thought it all over, that the struggle between them had been going on for a long time, and she saw it clearly as a struggle, and one that could have had no other end. She could not have acted differently, being what she was. It was not that she had set herself against a life of frivolity, for she had not realised fully, as she did now, that it was that that had been offered to her. It was not in her to accept it. To this young girl, life must have a serious basis, of duty and love at least, of self-sacrifice if it should be demanded of her. She had given duty and love to her aunt, and there had come a time when they had not been wanted of her, had been thrown back in her face. No, she had not failed; she could not have merged herself in the flow of shallow pleasure-seeking without going against every prompting of her nature. Her conscience was clear.

Of the final break she did not want to think too much. There had been a man whom her sane clean instinct had warned her to beware of. He had paid court to her, and she had thought that she would have her aunt's sympathy in rejecting his advances. Lady Bridgeworth had been angry about it in a curious sort of way which Olivia had not understood. She had boldly attacked the man himself in Olivia's presence, which had caused Olivia shame and distress. Then she had suddenly turned upon her and accused her of encouraging him. And after that she had gone on welcoming the man to her house. Even now, as her mind shrinkingly shirked the memory of those painful scenes, a deep blush spread itself over Olivia's face and neck, and she made a little gesture with her hand,

putting it all away from her. She knew that if she probed into it she would find something that would stain her mind, which already seemed soiled by such contacts. She would not think of it at all. It was enough that it had brought about the end of her companionship with her aunt, and whether she had first said that she must go back home, or her aunt had said that she did not want her with her any longer, she could not remember. In any case she could not have stayed.

She rose, and walked a few times up and down the shabby-carpeted room that was so dear to her, and then sat down again by the window to consider the pleasanter future. The past was done with. If she had failed in what she had undertaken, as little more than a child, the fault lay not in her. And she knew that she would not fail in what lay before her now. Her duty and her happiness would be one, and she smiled as her heart sprang to meet the joy that came flooding into it.

She had always loved her father passionately. He was so kind, so gentle, so good. She had never known her mother, and she had never missed her. He had in him that strain of tenderness that had enabled him to fulfil the part of both parents to her. She remembered little things that he had done for her when she had been a tiny child, and the time when it had begun to come home to her that he depended on her for his happiness almost as much as she depended upon him. She remembered no time when he had as much as rebuked her. That was partly because she had been 'good' as a child, but partly also because he had al-

lowed her independence of mind full scope from the earliest years. Certainly, in spite of her 'goodness,' she would not altogether have escaped rebuke from her mother, if she had been alive, nor from any woman who might have been concerned in her upbringing. But she had felt at an early age that, with so much trust given, it rested with her to direct her activities, of mind and body, into such channels as would please the father who loved her so. With perhaps most children such freedom as she enjoyed would have been a dangerous experiment. With her it had succeeded.

She felt some compunction now when she remembered that it had been her own decision to leave her father and go to her aunt. Lady Bridgeworth had asked for her, and her father had left it to her to decide. He had not even advised her; it was as if he trusted her judgment, at seventeen, in such a matter, more than he trusted his own. But perhaps she ought to have insisted on his advice, ought at least to have given more weight to the strength of her love for him. She had been too allured by the chance offered to her of creating happiness for one who was in trouble; and she had been partially blinded to her father's share in the surrender because she had found it difficult to make it herself on his account. She had left him alone for nearly three years, and she had not succeeded in her task. Well, that was all over and done with; she would not dwell on it. She had come back to him now, and knew, as she might not have known if she had always stayed with him in their quiet home, how greatly blessed she was in it.

There would be a round of daily duties, very dif-

ferent from any she had had to perform while living with her aunt, but much more worth doing in their loving servitude than those fetchings and carryings and waiting upon another's whims. She would be her own mistress, and smiled to herself, wondering how much that accounted for her eager anticipations of pleasure. There would be a scarcity of money. Many things that she had grown accustomed to she would have no longer. But she knew she could do without them. She had never allowed herself to become dependent upon luxury, though she had accepted it, as most young people do when it comes in their way. The constant changes she had enjoyed, travelling here and there to one interesting place after another, though never to England, would be hers no longer. But the changes had been too many, and she rested in the thought of this peaceful home, in which the sweet succession of seasons would bring her enough of change, and the feeling of security and permanence would deepen.

And all the quiet texture of her life would be shot through with the gold of her father's love for her and hers for him. She would devote herself to him, not only in the loving companionship which would be the chief pleasure of her life, but with care and forethought, and study of his tastes and his ways, surrendering some of her own if that should be necessary. She thought that she was too apt to follow her own way, and she knew that if she did so she would meet with no hint of resistance from him. He would be only too ready to give up anything to please her. It would be a contest between them as to which should

give way to the other, and she would have to be very careful not to let him see that she was giving up anything, if she should find that their desires differed at any point.

She felt quietly but intensely happy as she sat by the window at the sweet beginning of the summer day, at the beginning of her new life. The troubles of a difficult duty lay behind her; what was coming in this sheltered home, remote in the verdurous fastness of the English country from all the fret and worry of cities and the unrestful claims of pleasure, held no difficulties, but only the rich sense of love and protection given and returned. The birds sang to her of life and happiness, of the beauty of the world, of the goodness and rightness that wrapped her round. She could almost have wept for the delight of it all. There was no shadow on the lovely day, nor any on her young mind.

After a time she went back to bed again. She was tired from her long journey, and her sleep had been broken through the night. She did not awake until the maid came into her room with a breakfast tray. Then she was deeply distressed to find that it was nine o'clock.

Her father breakfasted at eight, and began his morning work with Bobby and Billy at nine punctually. She had looked forward to giving him his breakfast and going round the garden with him before he settled to his work, as she had always done before she had left home three years before. And she had told Fanny, who now came up smiling with her breakfast, that she was to be called at seven.

Fanny was a young girl from the village, in her first place. Olivia suspected that she had been engaged exclusively to wait upon her, for she had not been able to discover that there had been any servants at the Vicarage since her departure but the man and his wife who had sufficed for her father, both for the house and garden. She had had her own old nurse, who had stayed on as she grew older, but died soon after she had left England. The married couple had come since. She had not particularly taken to the wife, and had had no time to question her as to new arrangements that had been made. But it went ill with her ideas as to the place she would herself fill in the house that her coming should involve extra service. She intended to make her father much better served by the things she would do herself.

"The Vicar said I wasn't to wake you, Miss, till nine o'clock," said Fanny, smiling largely. "I was to get you as nice a breakfast as I could, and I hope you'll think I done it well, and oh, Miss, I do hope you'll let me unpack and put your things away for you. I'll wash my 'ands, and not dirty nothing, and I'll be ever so careful to do what you tell me." She put down the breakfast tray and clasped her hands. "And oh, Miss, if I could do your 'air!" she said ecstatically.

Fanny had been a protegée of Olivia's in her childhood. She was sixteen now, and immensely proud of the trust imposed upon her. Olivia had always been her idol—so pretty and graceful, and gentle and kind, though authoritative too over the village girls who had been in her Sunday school class and come in con-

tact with her otherwise. Now, in addition to the charm she had possessed before, she had for Fanny that of a great lady, fitly surrounded by beautiful and expensive 'things,' an object to be waited upon, and saved from all rude contact with household or even personal labour. Mrs. Morrow, the cook, also had some such idea of her floating in her mind. She was anxious to save her all household worries, and anxious also to keep in her own hands the not unprofitable task of domestic provision.

Olivia would have to begin by combating at least one of these ideas. As to Fanny, she was not quite sure. It would be hard to send the girl away for no fault of her own, when she had just come and was so anxious to acquit herself well. It might be possible to keep her, if she should find that domestic economy would permit.

"Listen, Fanny," she said. "I shan't want waiting on in that way at all. I must have my breakfast up here this morning, because I have overslept myself, but you must always call me at seven o'clock in the future, as I told you last night. Perhaps you shall help me put away my clothes this morning, as I don't suppose your other work has been settled yet; but what I shall want you to do, if you stay, is to learn to do things downstairs. I will try to train you into a good parlour-maid, and you must do all you can to learn quickly, so that you may be able to take service in a bigger house when you are older."

Fanny's face fell during this speech, of which the words 'if you stay' sounded an ominous knell. "The Vicar said I was to wait on you, Miss," she said, al-

most in tears, "and I know I couldn't do what the French maids could as you've had—not at first—but I'm quick to learn, and I thought you'd teach me to do that. I wouldn't want to do it for nobody but you, Miss, and I *do* hope you won't send me away without a trial."

"Look here, Fanny," said Olivia kindly, "I must let you into a little secret. My father wants to spoil me. He knows I have had a great deal of waiting on while I have been abroad, and he thinks I shall not be happy at home if I don't have it here. But I don't want that kind of waiting on. You shall help me, of course, if I do want a little help with my clothes, but where you can really help me is in waiting upon *him*, and making *him* comfortable. Only he mustn't know we're doing it, or he won't like it. So don't say anything about it to anybody. We'll talk together over what we can do, and it is to be a secret between us. And of course I shan't send you away if you do well."

Fanny brightened. She was enough of a child still to be enchanted at sharing such a secret with her young mistress; and to do something for the beloved Vicar was only a little less inspiring than to do something for his daughter. Olivia kept her with her while she ate her breakfast, and learnt enough to persuade her that there was a good deal in the house and its managing that wanted altering, and to be more than ever thankful that she had come back to look after her father.

Before she had finished dressing, Fanny came up again to say that Elsie and Rose Conway had come to see her. She sent for them to her room, and the

greeting of the three girls was like that of sisters long parted.

They had, in truth, scarcely been parted until Olivia had gone abroad. They had played together, and done lessons together, and Olivia had always taken the lead. After the first happy greetings, Elsie and Rose assumed, probably quite unaware of it, a slightly watchful attitude towards Olivia. They thought themselves entirely unchanged from what they had been, except that their hair was 'up" and their skirts were down. But they thought her much changed, though not the less dear to them on that account. Her toilet table was arrayed with silver, for her aunt had been generous to her, especially at the first, and given her many presents. And the daintiness of her clothes was far in excess of anything that even their fully paid-up allowances had made possible for themselves. Her hair was beautifully done, too, in a way that betokened familiarity with fashion that had hardly come into their ken, and she looked older and more self-possessed than her years, although still in the first sweet bloom of her womanhood. They seemed to themselves to be country bumpkins beside her, the contrast greater than it had been between them and the smart young women whom they had recently met at Prittlewell, and far beyond that afforded by their friends in the rectories and vicarages around. The doubt in their minds was whether Olivia had not got beyond them as a friend. In the state of poverty in which they lived at Watermeads they were not without experience of the cold-shoulder given to them by girls better endowed than themselves, from country houses which should have

contained none but intimate friends of the Conways. They were a little sensitive about pushing themselves in where they were not wanted, as they expressed it. Olivia, as the daughter of the dear old Vicar, and their own one-time playmate, was their natural affinity; but Olivia, the niece of her fashionable aunt, greatly developed in appearance, and possibly 'Frenchified,' might prove to be a different person.

Olivia soon set their doubts at rest. She was overjoyed at seeing these two dear girls again, the friends she would have chosen for her own girlhood even if proximity had left her a choice. She thought them nearly as little altered as they thought themselves, though Rose was even more beautiful than she had given promise of being, and Elsie also grown into a pretty graceful girl, only not to be considered unusually so because she was hardly ever to be seen without Rose by her side. They made her feel much younger herself, for she had thought of herself as old and mature for a long time past, having seldom enjoyed much of the society of girls of her own age, and having touched experiences that these friends of hers had been spared.

They were all three soon laughing and chattering together as in the old days, and Olivia had banished for ever the fear that she might come home changed to them. She showed them her 'things,' and made it quite clear that such of them as were costly would have to last her a long time, for she would have no chance of replacing them, unless her aunt sent her an occasional present. "But I don't think she will," she said. "She liked to see me smart when I was with

her, but I'm afraid she won't mind what I look like when I'm out of her sight."

Looked at in this way, Olivia's 'things' were seen to be lucky accidents such as might come to any girl, and not part of her at all. She was really just the same, and as interested as before in questions of economy, such as had often exercised their wits in the past. She drew from them their opinion of Mrs. Morrow, and decided upon their information and advice to get rid of her as soon as might be. And then she had to hear all about affairs at Watermeads, and heard more intimate details than would have been given to anyone but her.

"Dear Olivia," said Rose affectionately, when she was ready to go downstairs, "you're not a bit altered. I wonder how we've managed to do without you for so long."

CHAPTER X

THE GIFT OF YOUTH

The three girls ran downstairs in the happiest harmony with one another. Olivia felt almost a child again, so refreshing was it to return to girls' ways and girls' speech with these two old friends, who had been waiting for her in the quiet country with all the freshness and simplicity of their youth still clinging to them, while she had been getting older in gay foreign resorts. It was an added pleasure to her home-coming to have them there to confide in and to consult with. Their love for her father was only less than her own, and their interest in her plans for the future, both as regarded his welfare and her new position as mistress of the Vicarage, was almost as eager as her own.

She hesitated as to whether she should disturb the serious occupations in the study by a visit of greeting.

"I shouldn't go in now if I were you," said Elsie. "Nobody else is ever allowed to unless it's absolutely necessary, and the boys have a quarter of an hour's interval at eleven."

It was already half past ten, and Olivia reluctantly accepted Elsie's advice, half hoping that her father would come out to her when he heard her voice. But the study door remained closed, and the girls went into the drawing-room.

It was a charming old-fashioned room, rather long and very low, with a French window opening on to a little retired space of lawn ringed round with lilacs, and spreading limes behind them. It had not been used since the death of Olivia's mother. It smelt damp, and the wall-paper was discoloured and some of the pictures spotted. The furniture seemed strange to Olivia, for it had always been covered up. It was good of its kind, though most of it 'Victorian' in taste. Her father had told her that she was to use this as her own room. He had had it put into some sort of order, but she was to choose a new wall-paper for herself, and make any other rearrangement that she wished, with money that he would give her for the purpose. So it was her own kingdom that she was surveying with Elsie and Rose, who expressed friendly envy of so delightful a toy as a pretty room to be arranged and used as she wished.

They were deep in plannings when to their surprise and somewhat to their discomfiture the door was opened and a visitor announced by Fanny, to whom Olivia had already imparted some instruction as to the duties she would have to fulfil as parlour-maid.

The visitor was the Reverend Edward Probert, who had come over from his Rectory of Lutterbourne to see the Vicar upon some clerical matter, and who seemed at least as surprised to find himself proudly ushered into the presence of three girls as they were at his appearance. However, he had been introduced to Elsie and Rose at the Watermeads cricket-match, and not being particularly subject to shyness supported the ordeal of introduction to Olivia very well.

This young man, besides possessing advantages of person, had a pleasant and easy manner, which was rapidly making him a popular member of the county society that lay about his new sphere of influence. Furthermore, Lutterbourne was a 'good' living, with a fine house and garden, far in excess of the needs of a bachelor, and its rector was known to be well off besides, and to be destined for considerable wealth in the future, with a baronetcy thrown in. All this did not make him the less popular, in a neighbourhood where there was a good supply of marriageable girls, and Lady Sophia Raine's prophecy that he would very speedily be 'snapped-up,' seemed likely to be fulfilled, always supposing him to be willing to undergo the process. Elsie and Rose had heard echoes of this kind of talk, and immediately connected him, and perhaps his visit, with their beloved Olivia. They watched her behaving towards him with a self-possessed and yet girlish charm which made them proud of their recovered friend, and they sought in him signs, as they admitted to one another afterwards, that he was struck by so much grace and beauty. Surely he must be—from the first! However accustomed he might be to meeting with beautiful girls of the most finished manners, Olivia must be something quite exceptional. There was not the slightest hint of jealousy in their whole-hearted admiration of her, nor any thought of themselves in their eager desire that this attractive young man should exhibit himself as sharing it. They were both match-makers on the instant. It would be splendid if, almost on the moment of her arrival,

Olivia should be fallen in love with and translated again to a wider sphere.

But it must be confessed that Edward Probert showed himself somewhat disconcertingly impervious to Olivia's charms. Neither Elsie nor Rose could affirm, when they came to talk it over together, any more than that he *must* have seen how beautiful she was, and how clever and charming, and perhaps it was too much to expect any young man in these days to fall in love at first sight, but at any rate it was quite to be expected that he *should* fall in love with Olivia when he came to know her better, for he could have seen nobody in Meadshire who could touch her. That he had paid equal attention to them as to her made them like him all the more, for, of course, they were very different from Olivia. He had been easy to get on with, to talk to and to laugh with. If he did fall in love with Olivia and marry her, it would be delightful to feel that her husband was a friend of theirs too, and that she would not be taken away from them.

They went into the garden to await the interval of recreation, and at eleven o'clock there was an outrush of Bobby and Billy, on their way to a private corner where they were accustomed to spend their leisure with cricket stumps and a cricket ball. They paused when they saw the little group of three girls and a man on the lawn, and then came forward to greet Olivia politely as an old friend, but one who had grown somewhat beyond their ken. Their eyes were on Edward Probert as they did so, for his cricketing fame and prowess had impressed their young minds, and he was

already something of a hero to them, of whom they hoped to know more.

Olivia went in to her father, and greatly to Bobby's and Billy's delight Edward Probert accompanied them to their pitch and took off his coat when he got there to share in their practice and give them most valuable hints. Elsie and Rose stood by until they were joined by the Vicar, with Olivia's arm affectionately in his. Then Probert had to put on his coat again, but before lessons were resumed he had promised to come over to Watermeads that afternoon, which was a half-holiday, for practise at the net. Elsie and Rose, as they walked home along the river and across the park, agreed that it was extraordinary nice of him to be so kind to Bobby and Billy, but 'of course' he had heard that Olivia was coming to tea. It was rather clever of him to have found such an excellent excuse for coming, too.

The tea-party, if it could be called so, was something of an ordeal to the two girls. Mrs. Conway had what they were accustomed to call 'one of her awkward fits.' These expressions of personality took various forms. On this occasion it was by the pride that aped humility. Tea at the big round table in the corner of the great hall, with windows and doors wide open to admit the warm summer air into its stone-bred coolness, was an occasion that no one need feel the least ashamed of. But it would have been so easy to make some little alteration in the habitual family meal, in honour of guests; and their mother would not hear of any alteration being made at all. The table-cloth was in the middle of its weekly career, and she

would not have a clean one provided. The cake, reduced to a giant wedge, would be replaced on the morrow, and its replacement could easily have been anticipated; but she would not allow orders to be given to that effect. Nor would she permit butter to be provided, nor even two sorts of jam. At each request her determination stiffened to allow no difference to be made of any kind. "The Vicar knows how we live," she said, "and if our way of living is good enough for him it is good enough for Olivia; and if it is not, the sooner she learns that no difference can be made on her account the better. As for Mr. Probert, who has invited himself, so far as I can make out, let him see for himself. Let him see that decent poverty is not a thing to be ashamed of, and that those who are forced to practise it are not ashamed of it."

"But, mother dear, just a few scones and some toast and a little butter! Rose and I can make them, and you needn't bother about it at all."

"I have yet to learn that you and Rose can make butter, Elsie," said Mrs. Conway with withering emphasis,—"or at least without using cream, which, as you know very well, has to be paid for. And what are scones or toast without butter? I am *determined* to put down extravagance in this house, and to live on dry bread and water, if necessary, in order to relieve ourselves of this dreadful incubus of debt. Let me not hear another word upon the subject."

Elsie and Rose accepted the decision, well knowing that with their mother in this mood it was useless to press her any further. They could at least see that the table was well supplied with flowers, and went out

to pick them, but without saying anything about it, as Mrs. Conway was quite capable of forbidding even that inexpensive form of luxury.

Penelope, who had been a silent witness of the encounter, followed them into the garden. "Really, I think mother is getting beyond everything," she said. "But I will get her to let you make some scones if you like."

"You are not to talk like that about mother," said Elsie.

"How would you get her to let us make some scones?" asked Rose.

"I should tell her that Mr. Probert might fall in love with you or Elsie if he is properly treated," said Penelope. "Lady Sophia told mother that he——"

"You horrid little creature!" Elsie interrupted her. "You get worse and worse. Go away. We don't want you with us."

"I think I shall ask cookie to make some scones," said Penelope. "Jack Kirby gave me a box of chocolate once. Mr. Probert might do it too."

She walked away. Elsie and Rose agreed that she was becoming more and more impossible every day.

When they got indoors again, however, they found that their mother had 'come round' of her own accord. Penelope denied having said anything at all on the subject to her, but was ready with the reason for the change. "Dad is the Squire, and Mr. Bonner is the Vicar," she said. "If we don't have a clean tablecloth Mr. Probert will think Olivia is better than you."

Oh, the odious child! How did she come to have these horrible, but penetrating ideas, at her age?

Whatever Mrs. Conway's reasons for providing the clean tablecloth, with toast, scones, butter, a new cake, and two kinds of jam to put upon it, in silver and china that were at least as fine as any that could have been provided at any of the houses around, she was not prepared to relinquish her attitude of proud humility.

"This must be very different from anything that you have been accustomed to, Olivia," she said; "and indeed it is different from anything that *I* was accustomed to in my earlier years. If you have not learnt already, Mr. Probert, that an extreme, but I hope decent, poverty, is what must be expected in this house, you will find plenty of people to tell you. I make no difference in our ordinary way of living when we have the good fortune to receive guests. People must take us as we are and make the best of us. Do you have two lumps of sugar, or one, or none?"

Probert felt inclined to say none, but in view of the comparatively low price of cube sugar, asked for three, which put Mrs. Conway in a good humour with him. She confided to him towards the end of the meal, that although things were difficult for her as mistress of a large house, with a reduced income, it was always a pleasure to her to see friends at her tea table, and a great many of them constantly availed themselves of her simple hospitality. "We shall always be pleased to see *you*, Mr. Probert, whenever you like to come," she said. "Indeed, we are very glad to welcome you to the neighbourhood. I believe my husband has already called upon you, or if he has not, I know that he has had every intention of doing so. You will

not expect formal invitations from us, but we have a tennis-lawn and a cricket-field, and shall be delighted to see you playing games upon them whenever you feel inclined to do so."

Probert made suitable acknowledgments of this gracious invitation, and his promise to take Mrs. Conway at her word was made in no mere spirit of formality. Sydney Conway had had his eye on him, while talking chiefly to Olivia, and when they went out into the garden made himself pleasant, as he well knew how. He understood so well the ways and thoughts of young men, provided they were of the pattern of this one, to which he also had belonged in his youth. And youth had never seemed far away from him, though he was now over fifty. He had more to talk about to a young man between twenty and thirty than to a contemporary of his own. His own active life had practically come to an end when he had been about Probert's age. He seemed to the young man to be very much in the swim, and to be singularly ill-mated with the odd and rather formidable lady who had discoursed to him over the tea-table. Perhaps Sydney had wished to correct any impression that might have scared so eligible a young man away from the house; but it is certain, also, that he liked to see and talk to young men 'of the right sort.'

Nevertheless, he pressed Probert to make up a four at tennis with the three girls, instead of accompanying him and Bobby and Billy to the cricket-field. "The fact of the matter is," he said confidentially, as he went off with the disappointed boys on either side of him, "that you're too young and I'm too old for

Mr. Probert to be very anxious for our society; and when a person comes to your house, you know, you've got to see that he gets the amusement that *he* wants, not what *you* want."

Bobby and Billy, who found their father's advanced age no bar to the most enjoyable intercourse that came within their experience, and had stood by while he had talked to Probert as if they were two young men together, protested at this. "I expect he'd rather practise with us than play tennis with three girls," said Bobby.

His father put his hand on his shoulder and smiled down at him. "When you are as old as he is, my son," he said, "you may perhaps discover that there's no particular hardship in playing tennis with three girls."

"If *you* had played it would have been all right," said Billy loyally. "They did want you to."

"Oh, me! said Sydney. "Well, when you get to *my* age of course you'd rather play cricket with two boys—especially if they're your own, you know."

Bobby and Billy thought this quite natural, though the way in which it was said was pleasing to them. Not many 'chaps' had fathers with whom they were so completely at ease as they were with theirs. They had found that out already, though their experience of 'chaps' of their own age was as yet comparatively small.

But Sydney would very much have preferred to have been one of the party on the tennis-lawn. It made him feel a little sad that, in spite of the youth that was still in him, he must not consider himself a

welcome participant in the intimate amusements of young people. It was true that his own dear girls would always be as pleased to play in a game with him as with any young man—at present; and he had got back to his old terms with Olivia, who had taken the same view of him as a playmate as Elsie and Rose. All three of them had pressed him to make one of the four, and had meant it. Probert had pressed him too, and had not meant it, or so he thought. It was hardly natural that he should. He had already begun to address himself to establishing relations with the three pretty young girls. He might be content to talk about cricket and other common interests to a man much older than himself, when there was no getting away from his society; but, for free enjoyment, the older man must be out of the way. However much *he* might enjoy the happy chatter and kind approaches of youth, they were no longer his by right; he could only take his part in them on sufferance, with his own children, who knew him and loved him. With an outsider, his presence must at least divert the flow.

Sydney had long since decided that Elsie and Rose must have their chance, and had examined himself upon the effect that it would have upon him when young men should begin to be attracted by them. In a general sort of way he rather liked the idea. The companionship of Elsie and Rose, it is true, was about the best thing that his life contained at this time. Fred was too much away, and Bobby and Billy were too young for them to count as much to him in his daily life as the girls did. The friendship between him and them, apart from the love between father and

daughter, upon which there had never been any cloud from the earliest years, was as perfect as it could be in such a relationship. He would miss them horribly when they left their home. But he knew that they would not love him less when they came to take husbands, and it was one of the penalties of fatherhood that daughters could not stay at home for ever, and one that it would be absurd to kick against. After all, his love for them would be a mean and selfish thing if it did not lead him to desire their happiness, even at his own expense. Whatever twinges of jealousy he might feel when the young men began to gather round, which was how he pictured the entrance of Elsie and Rose to womanhood, he must hide them, and give the girls their chance.

Nevertheless, when Jack Kirby had shown himself attracted by Rose, he had had hard work to keep to his preformed intentions. He hated the freedom with which the self-satisfied rather noisy youth came and went, and the little trouble he took to hide what it was that he came for. Jack Kirby paid hardly as much attention to him personally as would show that he recognised him as the owner of a house in which he wished to make himself at home. No doubt he considered himself so much of a 'catch' that he could dispense with the attention that a young man attracted towards a girl would naturally show to her father. And, no doubt, from his gold-plated point of view, the Squire of Watermeads, in its decay, was a person of no importance whatever, and it was hardly worth concealing that opinion. Sydney had had hard work with himself to refrain from behaving towards

him as the autocratic grumpy parent of fiction, and sending him about his business with a flea in his ear. Certainly it was not the money that hung about the youth, or his prospective peerage, that held him back. It was the strong decision he had come to that when these things should begin to happen the girls must choose for themselves, so long as the man should not be objectionable in a way that he could recognise and they could not be expected to. Jack Kirby was always hovering about that border-line, but Sydney could not say to himself with a clear conscience that he had overstepped it. If he were to give him brusquely to understand that Rose was not for him, he could not justify himself. It would not be enough that he disliked him and his ways. That would only be showing the parental jealousy that he was on his guard against.

His patience under the tribulation that he was hiding from all about him was made easier, perhaps was only made possible, by the idea which he had formed, that Rose was not so taken with young Kirby as he obviously was with her. He had watched the dear child, closely and anxiously. She was as sweet and loving towards himself as she had always been, and he thought that if she had opened her heart to a lover, however tentatively, there must have been some difference in this respect. She would not have meant it, or even known it, but it would have wounded him sorely, and he could hardly have mistaken the signs. Perhaps she had been more loving towards him than usual, and once or twice she had come to him when she might have gone to Jack Kirby, and nestled to him, al-

most as if she needed to assure herself of his tenderness towards her. This had been balm to his sore heart. He was not without a strong hope that if Jack Kirby did propose marriage to Rose, she would refuse him, and smiled grimly to himself as he contrasted his real desires on the subject with those with which he was no doubt credited on all hands.

And yet, he told himself, his passionate dislike of Jack Kirby was not the measure of his feeling towards a prospective husband for his girls. The reception he had given to his wife's disclosure of Bellamy's supposed attitude in his household had by no means represented a blindness on his part to what was going on. She had long since ceased to share any of his secret thoughts, although she thought she had the key to them all. Bellamy, as the possible husband of one of his girls, had been present to him from the very beginning, when Mrs. Conway had only seen in him a strange artist; but he had not become sure that Bellamy really wanted anything of the sort when she had suddenly convinced herself that there was no other explanation of his continued presence at Watermeads. Elsie was quite as dear to him as Rose, and was even more a cherished companion, but he felt none of the dislike at the idea of her falling in love with Bellamy that he felt at the possibility of Rose falling in love with Jack Kirby. He was indeed watching with some interest for signs that she was likely to do so, and had not yet found them. He would hate losing her, but she would gain more in happiness by being married to the right sort of man than he could lose, and he thought that Bellamy was the right sort of man.

As for this young parson—well, it was early days to judge yet, and if he had come for anybody, it was probably Olivia. But Sydney would have been ready to stretch a few points in his favour, if it had been necessary, for the pleasure of seeing him cut out Jack Kirby.

All the same, he envied him that priceless gift of youth which made it natural that he should make up the four on the tennis-lawn, and took off his coat with a sigh to bowl to Bobby at the net.

CHAPTER XI

LETTERS

Dearest E. and R. (wrote Fred to his sisters, on the day following the dance given by Mrs. Blumenthal at Hillstead):

You will know by this time what it means your not getting a wire from me this morning. I feel pretty beastly about it all, but perhaps it will buck me up a bit to write to you. It isn't all over by any means, and I shall have a jolly good fight for it, but I did so hope that I should have some good news to send you this morning, dear old girls. Life's a rum business, isn't it?

The dance was jolly well done. There was a great tent leading out of the drawing-room to dance in, and heaps of flowers, and a top-hole supper with quails, and Chinese lanterns and fairy lights all over the garden, and places to sit out. It was a gorgeous night with a moon. The whole thing was *romantic*, like Florence, and Romeo and Juliet, and all that. Freda looked lovely. She was in pink, which suits her best, and her hair was like spun gold. But from the very first things didn't look as if they were going right. She had half promised to let me take her in to supper, but when I wanted to put my name down she wouldn't, as she said she couldn't engage herself in their own house until she saw how things would turn out.

And she would only sit out half of one dance in the garden, and then in a place that was quite light, so I shouldn't anyhow have had a chance of asking her, and it looked as if she didn't mean that I should.

Well, to cut a long story short, the Lord Mayor was there, and his family, and they were made a tremendous fuss of. There was a son who paid a lot of attention to Freda, and it was him she went into supper with. I hated the fellow, he looked such a cad, and I told Freda so and she was annoyed and said he didn't, and anyhow she had to be civil to him as her mother had told her to, so I suppose the old girl wants him for Freda, but I really don't think *she* wants him, and it was just a little better when they'd gone away, and I had the last dance with her, and she was awfully sweet and like I hoped she'd have been all the time. I'd have tried my luck then, but it was too late.

Well, I suppose you'll say I'm jealous, but I certainly shouldn't stoop to be jealous of a bounder like that, and if I thought that Freda really preferred him to me I should just clear out, for she wouldn't be the girl I've taken her for, and I shouldn't want her any more. I should think you'd be able to see that. At present I'm feeling pretty low. I only slept for about half an hour last night, and I've had a beastly time with Cousin Henry today. When I've finished this I'm going to bed. Perhaps tomorrow I shall feel more like facing things, but anyhow I'm not going to give up.

As it's only nine o'clock I may as well tell you about Cousin Henry before I dry up. He and Aunt Kate were at the dance last night, and he got himself in-

troduced to the Lord Mayor, which bucked him up considerably, and he was as amiable as possible when I had a word or two with him. But he must have drunk too much bubbly wine or something, for when he came up to the office this morning an hour late he was like a bear with a sore head. I could see he wanted to drop on me if he could only find an excuse, and I was pretty careful over my work, but at last he did discover something that had gone a little wrong. It wasn't my fault, but he let me have it all the same. He said I was an idle good-for-nothing fellow, and thought of nothing but amusing myself and dancing about all the night—pretty good when he had been at the same dance himself, and had stopped in bed when I hadn't! I wasn't feeling in the best of tempers myself because of not sleeping and what had happened, so I didn't take more than a certain amount, and we had what almost amounted to a scrap. Anyhow, the end of it was that he said I needn't come back after my holidays. I said 'All right, Cousin Henry. I know I'm not the slacker you try to make me out, and I believe now I could get just as good a job somewhere else as I've got here.' That's true, you know, and it touched him. He said 'It isn't only a *job* I've given you and paid you well for it when you weren't worth it. If you were fit to be anything but a clerk you could have had a partnership here in a few years' time. I gave you your chance when you hadn't got it in you to make a penny for yourself and that's all the return I get for it. You've got no more gratitude in you than this piece of wood.' 'Well,' I said, 'I've told you lots of times that I'm grateful for what you've done for me,

and I have been. If you're going to sack me for nothing at all I've nothing further to be grateful for, so I won't waste time by repeating it.' Then I cleared out. I think I was right, don't you? Mind you I don't believe he means me to go, but I'm getting sick of being treated as he treats me, and I'm not going to stand any more of it. I'm rather glad now that Uncle Mark put me off dining with him till tomorrow. I shall tell him all about it, and if he's decent I shall ask his advice. I dare say he could easily get me a job himself, if he wanted to, a secretaryship or something, and if he did that it would be rather fun to see how old Henry took it. I haven't told him yet that I've met Uncle Mark. I should think he's bound to be jealous of him. I feel rather vindictive towards the old snork, but I mustn't forget what he did for me. If he'd only be as decent as he was at first I should have nothing much to complain about.

Goodbye, dear old girls, I really must go and lie down, I'm so sleepy. I'll write to you again after I've dined with Uncle Mark. But write to me first and tell me all you are doing. How is Bellamy? I like that fellow. Has Penelope said anything awful lately? Well, I feel pretty blue, but it has cheered me up writing to you. Give my love to Olivia. It will be jolly to see her again.

Much love from FRED.

DEAREST FREDDY (wrote Elsie in reply to this):

We were awfully sorry to hear of your disappointment, dear. Wasn't it rather horrid of her to throw

you over for the Lord Mayor's son? You hardly write a word of blame of her, which is very sweet of you, but Rose and I have talked it all over, and we think we see more than you do in it. Of course, darling, you can't be expected to know about girls as we do, and in anything like falling in love we *can* help you if you'll let us, I mean that we *can* tell you what a girl is like better than you can possibly find out for yourself. Neither Rose nor I would have behaved as you say she did *unless* of course she isn't in love with you at all and *is* inclined to be in love with the Lord Mayor's son, or if she wanted to make you jealous, which would be horrid of her. Dearest Freddy, aren't you really taken with her only because she is very pretty? I wish you would think it all over and not do anything more about it till you come down here again. It won't be long now before the holidays, and I think if it *is* really all right with her she deserves to be kept waiting a little for the way she treated you.

It is *horrid* of Cousin Henry to make himself so horrid to you. But Freddy dear, do try and put up with him if you possibly can. You have got your foot on the ladder now and it would be awfully disappointing if you had to begin all over again. Of course if Uncle Mark likes you and offers to do something for you it would be different, and Cousin Henry has behaved so badly that you don't really owe him anything. But I won't say anything more about all that till you have seen Uncle Mark. We are so excited about what will happen. *Do* write to us *early* tomorrow and tell us everything. We shall go and meet the evening post,

and shall be *very* disappointed if there isn't a letter from you.

It is lovely to have dear Olivia home again. You can't think how beautiful and charming she has grown, though she is just the same as she was in everything that matters and not spoilt the least little bit. Dear old Mr. Bonner seems a different man now he has got her home, he goes about with a seraphic smile on his face and when he looks at her you want to hug him, he loves her so much. And she thinks about nothing but to make him happy and comfortable, and it isn't so very easy at the Vicarage, as she has to do everything on a little money, and she has found out all sorts of things about the Morrows and has given *her* notice, and of course Morrow will have to go too, though he isn't as bad as she is. Mr. Bonner was worried about it, and the Morrows appealed to him against her, but she would have her own way, and is shielding him as well as she can from all the annoyance they would like to make for him. But I think really she rather enjoys it, if she can keep him from being bothered. She is awfully funny about the Morrows and what they say and do. She seems much gayer and brighter even than she was before she went abroad. She says it is such a relief to be herself, and to have people round her that love her, and of course she did have an awful time with that horrid aunt of hers, she has told us a good deal about it, though not all, and her face becomes clouded when she mentions it, so what we are trying to do is to help her to forget it.

I didn't mean to say anything to you about some-

thing that is rather exciting us, but as I'm in a letter-writing mood, and I hate to have *any* secrets from you, dear old Freddy, I think I will.

Well, you remember Mr. Probert, of course. He has been coming over here almost every afternoon to play tennis and sometimes cricket, and there is no doubt that it is Olivia he is coming for, and I believe that is part of what makes her so gay and happy, though we haven't *dared* to say anything to her yet, as it might spoil it all, and he hasn't done or said anything yet really that would give us an excuse. He is really *awfully* nice, Freddy, and we are all four the greatest of friends, and have the greatest fun together. I only wish you could be with us too, because we have got heaps of new jokes and sayings, and I don't like you to be out of them. But you will soon be home now, dear old boy, and I am sure you will like Edward as much as all of us do. It will be lovely if he does marry Olivia, for she will live quite close to us, and I should think it couldn't be often that one likes the husbands of one's friends as much as we should like him. Even mother has taken to him, and has told him every bit of the family history, including about Uncle Mark, and Dad likes him awfully and he likes Dad, and says he has never known a man of his age it is so jolly to be with. So you see, Freddy dear, we are a very happy party at present, and whatever happens to us in the future, I shall never forget this lovely summer, the only drawback is *you* not being here, but if it only doesn't begin to rain just when your holiday begins, it will be just perfect.

You ask about Giles Bellamy, we call him Giles

now, because when we slipped into Christian names with Edward, he said he had one, and wasn't so old after all that we couldn't use it. It seemed a little odd at first, I suppose you would say because of his beard, but, Freddy dear, he has shaved it off since, and he looks years and years younger, and now it seems quite natural to think of him as one of ourselves, and he *seems* younger too, and is much more merry. I think it is because Edward sets such a good example in that way. There is only one thing about him, that he hates Jack Kirby, and won't come near us when he is here, and once or twice he has been positively rude to him. I must say Jack took it very good-naturedly, and it didn't seem to alter his good opinion of himself at all. You know, Freddy dear, he *is* rather pushing in his ways, and selfish, too, about always wanting to get Rose to himself, at least for a time, when he is here. It is so different from the way both Edward and Giles behave. If we weren't certain of it by hundreds of little signs, Rose and I agree that you could hardly tell that it was Olivia who was the attraction to Edward, he is so awfully nice to all three of us, and Giles is just the same to Olivia as he is to us, and she likes him *immensely*. So there we are as a very merry happy party, and when Jack comes it seems to spoil it somehow. I still can't tell whether Rose really likes him. I wish we had talked about it together at the very first, then I should have known all that she is thinking. But somehow we didn't, and now I feel that I can't, unless she does first. I'm quite sure she will tell me if anything troubles her, and that's why I don't worry very much about it. And I *believe* she

would tell me if she were really in love with him, and that's why I think she isn't—yet. She likes him of course, and laughs at Giles for hating him so, as we all do. Could she laugh at Giles and stick up for Jack if she was really in love with Jack? That's another reason why I think she isn't.

Darling old Dad seems rather worried, but he says there's nothing the matter. It can't be money, because there's quite a lot left still from the sale of Grandfather John, and besides, he always talks quite openly about money matters. I hope you will have some good news to send about Uncle Mark. That would cheer him up, and it may be what is on his mind. But it isn't like him not to tell us all about it.

Now I must really leave off.

Heaps of love, dear old boy,
From your loving Elsie.

Rose wrote by the same post.

Darling Freddy:

Elsie says she has told you what we think about Freda. We may be all wrong, and I think she *must* be nice or you wouldn't have fallen in love with her. Still, if it doesn't go right, Freddy dear, you know how awfully much we love you at home, so don't be too unhappy about it.

Edward Probert is very nice and I am sure you will like him. We *think* he's in love with our dear Olivia, but Penelope, the odious little wretch, says he comes here after me! That is just to show you what she is still like, as you ask after her. She doesn't improve as she gets older, and you must take her in hand when

you come home. We are all three friends with him, but it is *not* me he comes here 'after.' I should know well enough if it were and *shouldn't say anything about it.*

Giles Bellamy is awfully sweet; he is like a very kind elder brother. How I wish he would marry darling Elsie so that we might have him as a real brother, not that we should ever love him better than you, darling Freddy, at least I suppose *she* would if she married him, and that seems rather funny because I can't imagine loving any man better than one's own brother. Except perhaps one's own father. Dad has been most *awfully* loving and sweet to me lately, and I simply adore him. He's the dearest kindest father anybody ever had, and I do feel so sorry for him with all his bothers. If only Uncle Mark would do something that would make him happy and contented again! I believe that all the anxieties he has had for years and years are beginning to tell on him at last, he seems to be getting older. He has stood up against them for so long, and made the best of things and kept cheerful over it, but now he is beginning to feel the burden. If you can send us some good news tomorrow it will make us all awfully happy.

I mustn't write any longer. *Bother* Cousin Henry! Your friend Jack Kirby has been here sometimes at week ends. We are looking forward *awfully* to your coming home, and if you don't go back again to Cousin Henry so much the better.

Goodbye, darling,

Your ever loving

Rose.

Fred wrote on the following day, but not until the evening.

My Dearest E. and R.:

Everything is all right. *Everything.* I hardly know where to begin, I'm so bucked, so I will begin at the beginning. I dined with Uncle Mark at the Wanderers'. He gave me a jolly good dinner with some *wonderful* champagne, and made me drink nearly all of it as he said he couldn't touch more than one glass and he wanted to enjoy it 'vicariously'—is that spelt right?—and there wasn't much of it left. He was *extraordinarily* friendly and most awfully amusing. But after dinner he was quite ready to be serious and I told him all about Cousin Henry, and about Freda, too. I'd never thought of doing that, but I'm jolly glad I did. About Cousin Henry he said he didn't know what I was doing in that galley—I think that comes from a French expression, doesn't it?—and the sooner I got out of it the better. Then what do you think he said, calmly sitting back in his chair and taking his cigar out of his mouth to look at the ash? He said 'You had better come and be my secretary. I'll give you four hundred a year. That ought to be enough to get along on for the present, and if it isn't you can tell me about it!!!'

Well, I was so knocked over that I didn't know what to say to thank him, but he cut me short when I did say something and said 'Oh, that's all right my boy. Four hundred a year is nothing to me, and you're quite welcome to it. You won't have as much to do as your father did, but there are lots of odd little jobs, and I

shall like to have somebody to go about with me sometimes. I shall be the gainer, and if it suits you, so much the better.'

Now wasn't that a ripping nice way of putting it? And that isn't nearly all. He is coming down to Watermeads to see us. At least he is going to Prittlewell in September to shoot, and he said he would come over to Watermeads, and if he liked us and we liked him he might stay a few days. I said we should all be awfully pleased, and I thought he *would* like us, and Dad would be specially pleased, and he said he would like to see Dad again after all these years, as he'd always been very fond of him. He said this quite seriously, and of course it *is* rather comic after what has happened, but we have to make some allowances for him, he is pretty old, though he doesn't look it, and he is certainly going to do the right thing by us now.

Well, I'll go on. He said I must have rooms in London, and if I liked to take them unfurnished he would furnish them for me or have things brought up from Watermeads if I preferred that, as there must be a lot of things there that can be spared. He said we could go and look for rooms together round St. James's. It was then I said that I was hoping to get engaged, and he was a bit bowled over at first, but when I had told him who it was he said that if the *girl* was all right it would do, but he should like to see her first. Then I told him about the night before, and he laughed and said I was to go to Blumenthal with his compliments and tell him that I was Mr. Mark Drake's nephew, and he should like me to bring Miss

Blumenthal to see him. He wouldn't say a word more, but talked about other things, and made himself as pleasant as possible for the rest of the evening. I think he really *does* like me, and he has been so kind that I couldn't help liking him if I tried. When I went away he put his hand on my shoulder quite affectionately and said 'Goodbye my boy, get away from Mr. Wilkins as soon as you can and come to me. I'll treat you better than he did.' He *is* a nice old boy, —I shall do my best to please him, and I believe we shall get on well together.

Well, now I come to dear Cousin Henry. I went into his room this morning and said 'As you have given me notice to leave you do you mind if I go at once?' He looked pretty black I can tell you, and said in a sour kind of way 'Why, has anybody left you a fortune?' I said 'No, but I'm going to be secretary to my uncle, and he wants me as soon as I can go.' You should have seen his face. I don't think I've ever said a single word to him or any of them about Uncle Mark, but he knew at once who I meant and he said 'Oh, so *he* has taken you up, has he?' I said 'I dined with him last night and told him that you had given me the sack, and he said he should like to have me with him as my father used to be, and the sooner I could come the better. As you have always told me I wasn't the slightest use to you, and business is a bit slack now you won't miss me if I do go, will you? Of course I shouldn't like to inconvenience you.' I don't know whether it wasn't rather beastly of me to put it like that, but really, I've put up with such a lot from him that I feel as if I must get a bit of my own

back. Well, he flew into a furious temper, called me an ungrateful young cub, and said he hadn't meant to get rid of me at all but only to give me a lesson that would make me think more seriously about my work. I let him talk and didn't answer him back. That annoyed him, and at last he told me to get out. I was to think it over and not be a fool. Anyhow he couldn't do without me till the time came for my holiday. I thought that as he *had* been decent to me at first I'd leave it at that. If he sees I'm bent on going he probably won't want to keep me, and anyhow Uncle Mark won't press it. Besides I don't really want to leave Hillstead just yet.

Well, that's for Cousin Henry. This afternoon I got back at half past five and called on the Blumenthals. As luck would have it I walked up from the station with Blumenthal himself. He was rather grumpy, as it was hot and his car wasn't there and there were no cabs, and he didn't want to be bothered with me. I tried to amuse him with an agreeable flow of conversation, but he wasn't taking any. Then suddenly an inspiration came to me. Without waiting for second thoughts I caught my breath and said 'Mr. Blumenthal, I want to ask your permission to ask Freda to marry me.'

Well, that seemed to interest him some. He looked like apoplexy for a moment and then he laughed and said 'That's pretty good jeek, young Mr. Gonway. May I ask what your brosbects are?' He talks like that. So I told him, and you bet I played Uncle Mark for all I was worth. Watermeads, too. I thought it might have some effect, though I didn't hide that

there wasn't much money in it at present. But it seemed to have more even than Uncle Mark. He said 'Do you mean to tell me seriously Mr. Gonway that you belong to a Gounty Vamily?' I'm afraid he's rather a snob, but Freda isn't. I told him he could look us up in a book, and the long and the short of it is that he said I might ask Freda. But he shouldn't put any bressure on her. Then he said 'But mind I'm not going to have any humbug,' and he told me a story that made me laugh all over inside, though I kept a grave face. It seems that the Lord Mayor's son was dead nuts on a girl that they had brought up to the dance. I don't know her name but I remember her face. They had quarrelled coming up and he had paid attention to Freda to score off her. I suppose it brought her to book, for they went down together and got engaged on the way. Fancy his telling me all that! And where he got it from I don't know.

Well, dear old girls I shifted my clothes and went to their house as soon as I could. As luck would have it again I was shown into a room where Freda was alone. She was surprised to see me, so her father can't have said anything. In five minutes I was a happy man! !

I shan't tell you any more now but shall wait till I come home. And I'm writing to mother to ask if I can bring her with me. She's really *awfully* sweet. She *hated* the Lord Mayor's son, but had to be civil to him because old Blumenthal told her to. She generally has her own way with him, but sometimes he comes down on her like a ton of bricks and has his.

Goodbye my old pets. I know you will love her. I wouldn't change places now with Jack Kirby or anybody.

Your ever loving brother,

FRED.

CHAPTER XII

FREDA

Elsie and Rose threw a last look round the room. They had put flowers upon the dressing-table, and elsewhere, and whatever other arrangements could be made to prepare for the coming of an honoured guest they had made.

"I don't think there is much to grumble at," said Elsie. "You could hardly find a nicer room anywhere."

"It *is* pretty," said Rose, with a shade more of doubt.

It was a very pretty room—large and square, as nearly all the rooms at Watermeads were. Windows in two of the walls gave charming views of the garden and the park. The evening sun cast bright parallelograms on the faded carpet. Elsie would have pulled down the blinds of the west window if they had not been so dilapidated; it was a choice between showing their shabbiness or that of the carpet; and the colours of the carpet were almost beyond further reduction by the action of the sun. The furniture was beautiful. There was a great four-post bed with pillars of carved and fluted mahogany, tallboy chests of drawers, eighteenth century chairs and writing-table. All the rich hues of the wood had been brought out by age and hard rubbing, and the brasses polished to staid

brightness. Elsie and Rose had done a good deal of the rubbing and polishing themselves of late. There were dozens of bedrooms at Watermeads that were permanently shut up, with furniture bunched up together and covered with dust sheets. This, and a smaller one, were kept in being for the rare visitors who slept in the house. Curtains and bed-hangings and carpet were changed from time to time, when it seemed that amongst those stored away, or rolled up, there were rather fresher ones than those in use; and there had sometimes been a rearrangement of pictures and ornaments; but of these there was no lack anywhere.

There were valuable prints on the walls; fine china on the mantelpiece and in a Queen Anne glassed cupboard; old silver on the writing-table. But the toilet ware was made up of odd pieces, and the pretty old-fashioned paper showed an enormous stain in a corner where the rain had come through the damaged roof. These were the two chief blots, but they were big enough to bring that note of doubt into Rose's voice, as she surveyed the sum total of the careful preparations which she and Elsie had made.

It was Freda Blumenthal who was to occupy the room. She was coming down with Fred, on the first day of his month's holiday, and her future sisters-in-law were naturally anxious to create as favourable an impression upon her as was possible under the circumstances.

"Naurally," said Elsie, as they still lingered by the sunny west window, "if she loves Fred she will make the best of things. Olivia says it ought

to make her love him all the more, to find us as we are."

"Yes," said Rose contemplatively. "If I loved anybody I should be sorry for them because they had come down in the world, as I suppose we have; especially if I could do something to raise them up again."

This was oft-covered ground, but the girls were never tired of discussing Freda, both in her personal and accidental qualities.

"If her father left her a lot of money," said Elsie, "and she had the taste for it, she could have the greatest fun in the world restoring Watermeads to what it used to be. There's plenty to work on, and I don't believe it would cost so very much after all. It isn't like a great house with nothing in it."

It was understood between them that these exercises of imagination referred to a future time, when Fred should be master of Watermeads. Fred would then be rich too, either as beneficiary of Uncle Mark or through his own exertions; but it was his wife who would naturally get most fun out of the rehabilitation of the house.

"I do hope we shall like her," said Rose, for the hundredth time.

"I'm going to," said Elsie resolutely. "Fred wouldn't have chosen her if she hadn't been all right."

"He might have been deceived in her," said Rose. "But we'll hope he wasn't. Nothing could be sweeter than the letter she wrote to us."

Half an hour later the station fly drew up before the great entrance of Watermeads. The whole family had gathered at the top of the steps when it had first

been descried in the distance, crawling over the wide expanse of the park, like a black fly. The top had been seen to be encumbered with luggage, and on the box had been an unexpected figure, which after considerable discussion had been recognised as a maid. Fortunately the dressing-room next to Freda's bedroom only wanted a trifle of attention to make it habitable, and orders had been given that this should be done, directly it had been agreed that the black-bonneted figure on the box could only be that of a maid.

Fred put a happy grinning face out of the window of the fly as it debouched upon the space in front of the house. By that time the Conway family was at the bottom of the steps, except Mrs. Conway, who stood, a massive stately figure, in the doorway, and Penelope, to whom it seemed good for the moment to create the effect of clinging to her mother's skirts.

Fred alighted and helped Freda out of the fly. She made a charming figure in her pretty summer travelling costume. It had needed no violent exercise of imagination on Fred's part to liken her hair to spun gold. Her eyes were of *pervenche* blue; she had the creamiest of skins delicately tinged with rose; all the soft delicious curves of youth were in her slim form. She was too tall to be likened to a figure of Dresden china, but that was the effect created by the delicacy of her colouring. She was, in sum, an extraordinarily pretty girl. Hypercriticism might have found fault with the set of her mouth, which looked as if it were meant to express discontent amongst other things, but she was smiling radiantly as she stepped out of the fly. Any inclination towards discontent that she

might have felt at any time should have been removed, or at least lessened, by the obvious effect her arrival made upon the whole Conway family.

Sydney received her from his son, and kissed her hand. "My dear," he said, "you have made us all very happy, and we are going to make you very happy."

She blushed and looked pleased; and indeed it had been beautifully done. In his old grey flannel suit, which he had refused to change for a newer one, the Squire of Watermeads looked and behaved like a prince, and had treated her like a princess. Any girl must have been pleased with such a reception.

Freda gave a quick smiling side glance at Elsie and Rose and Bobby and Billy, standing at the foot of the steps, and ran up them lightly to greet Mrs. Conway.

That lady had already decided upon her own method of reception. She was to be the stately mother, who must be paid court to. Her attitude was to indicate judgment held in suspense, but ready to incline towards leniency. But that beautiful blushing face advanced towards her to be kissed blew the crotchets out of her brain. She kissed the girl warmly, but said nothing. She always found it difficult to say things in an emergency unless she had thought of them beforehand, but she was conscious of high approval of Fred's choice, and relief at finding it unnecessary to insist upon her position, since from the girl's manner everything she could desire in that way was already accorded to her. This feeling was heightened by Freda's little speech to her, possibly prepared beforehand. It was delivered with an engaging smile, and ran: "I

must apologise for taking Fred away from you, Mrs. Conway; but you know I'm not *really* going to take him away from you."

"Charming!" thought Mrs. Conway; "and there is no trace of the German about her whatever." She gathered herself together to say something nice, something that would set the girl at her ease and make her feel that she was accepted into the bosom of the family. "You have brought lovely weather with you," she said graciously. "I hope that it will be fine as long as you stay here."

Penelope was next warmly embraced, and submitted to the operation with surprising equanimity; for she was as a general rule averse from being kissed, and had announced to her sisters that she would treat Freda properly if she treated *her* properly, but should refuse to be slopped over, and should reserve her judgment as to whether Freda was really nice until she saw whether she had brought her something.

"I've found out what *you* like," said Freda in her ear, "and if you come up to my room after I've unpacked I'll give it to you."

But Penelope had submitted to her embrace before this happy promise had been held out to her; and had even returned it.

Freda had a little speech both for Elsie and Rose, which she delivered with her eyes fixed sweetly upon them, and a smiling mouth. Elsie and Rose were not ready with little speeches in return, and felt rather awkward in face of her self-possessed amiability. But they were not inclined to blame *her* for making them feel so; her offering of sisterly affection put every-

thing on the right footing. If she meant to be like that towards them, then any doubts that they might have harboured as to her essential 'niceness' were swept away.

She did not make the mistake of kissing Bobby and Billy, washed and brushed though they were. It was enough for them that their fears in this respect were proved baseless, but she added to the good impression she had made on them by saying: "Fred has told me all about your cricket. I used to play at school, and I loved it. I don't play now, but I shall recognise a good stroke when I see you make one."

Truly, this was an admirable specimen of girlhood! Bobby and Billy had a concomitant wild desire to go off and practise strokes forthwith, but restrained themselves in view of the immediate imminence of tea. They had been very doubtful about Fred's wisdom in becoming enmeshed with a girl, just as life was opening delightfully before him, and he would probably have more time for cricket than ever before. But now he was triumphantly vindicated. A girl who could recognise strokes! Even Elsie and Rose had never really been able to do that.

They went into the great hall, where the table was set for tea as usual. It had been swept and garnished, and all the litter removed. The tea-table, set with the best silver and china, displayed a greater variety of delicacies than usual. The shabbiness of things whose shabbiness could not be disguised detracted little from the general effect, which was that of old established dignity and homeliness combined. There was nothing here to show that the Conways were very

poor for people in their position, nothing even to show that they had not as much money at their command as they could have wished for, since there are many people living in fine houses that have come down to them who do not spend money on keeping them up to the pitch of perfection in the matter of furnishing and decoration.

Mrs. Conway had found her tongue. "Would you like to go up to your room now, Freda?" she asked, "or will you have tea at once? A cup will refresh you after your journey, and it is quite ready,"

Freda said she would have tea at once. "Parker can unpack for me," she said, "and I can go up afterwards. I *hope* you didn't mind my bringing a maid, Mrs. Conway. Fred said you might not be prepared for her. If I had thought of it I would have asked you."

"We are *quite* accustomed to visitors bringing maids," replied Mrs. Conway. "Indeed, I should have been surprised if you had *not* brought one."

This was a 'smasher.' Mrs. Conway was addicted to them, but they created no particularly harmful effect upon those who knew her. She carried her own full share of the credulity she imposed upon them, for she believed every word of what she said.

"Your Parker will create a pleasing impression in the servants' quarters, my dear," said Sydney, "and she will get more attention than she would if they were of her own sort."

It was the incurable Conway inclination to put all the facts relative to their poverty upon the table, already showing itself. Mrs. Conway did not share it,

but the tide was against her. She could not keep up any attempt at making the best of things for long. She now breathed heavily and looked aside, but Freda began to exclaim ecstatically about the great hall and everything around her. "You didn't tell me *half* how lovely it all is," she said to Fred.

"We'll all go round in a party after tea and show you everything," said Sydney. "I dare say you'd rather go round with Fred alone, but he isn't going to be allowed to monopolise you, you know. You're going to be one of us, and we like to hunt in a pack."

"Oh, that will be lovely," said Freda happily. "I'm simply longing to see everything."

"Well, there's plenty to see," said Sydney modestly. "We're all very fond of Watermeads, and very proud of it too. The paint has been rubbed off here and there, but a fresh bit of it at any time would put everything right."

"I know paint is awfully expensive," said Freda. "It cost father I don't know what the last time the Manor was done."

Sharp eyes watched Fred and Freda during the progress of the meal. He was evidently in the seventh heaven of delight with her, and with the impression she had made and was improving every minute. His ecstatic state might be taken for granted, but it was gratifying to realise what extra pleasure it was giving him that she pleased the rest of them, and that they pleased her. He did not want to keep it all for himself, nor did she so fill his mind as to drive out his affection for them. But Fred's attitude was always right in everything, in the opinion of Elsie and Rose;

and as for Bobby and Billy, they accepted everything he did without question.

As for Freda, it was natural that on her first introduction to Watermeads, anxious to acquit herself well, she should pay less attention to Fred than was probably usual with her. But she did not stint him of looks and smiles, and whenever she did speak to him there was a 'something.' Yes, she did love him, as the dear boy deserved to be loved. It would have made up for a great deal, even if she had not been quite so 'nice' as was to be hoped for. But she *was* nice, though possibly a trifle over eager to please; and that slight fault could easily be forgiven her under the circumstances.

This was Elsie's and Rose's verdict when they were first alone together. The rest of the family, including even Mrs. Conway for once, was 'going round'; but, in the temporary adjustment of the household to a higher pitch of living than was customary, the two girls had a good deal to do in the way of preparation. Their work now was to set the table for dinner. In the meantime Freda was being shown the gardens. If they hurried, they could get their work done in time to join the party before they had finished their tour of exploration.

They had taken Freda up to her room, and she had expressed herself enchanted with it. She had never slept in such a room before, she said. Her own was perhaps bigger, and it had a charming view over garden and woods. Nobody would believe, she told them, that it was only five miles from St. Paul's, for not a roof or chimney could be seen from it. But this was

far better. Somehow you *felt* that you were in the country. She made light of the great stain on the wall, which was so much in evidence that attention had to be called to it. It was the maid who, still very much in evidence, hoped that it did not mean that the room was damp. The maid looked superior, and what Rose afterwards called sniffy, and she did not leave the room, although she seemed to have nothing left to do there, but regarded the two girls with critical eyes, so that they wished Freda would send her away. But Freda seemed anxious to propitiate her, and it was Elsie and Rose who went away, when they had wanted to have a little private talk, and the maid who stayed. Perhaps she too wanted to have a little private talk.

Cooky, downstairs, professed herself hostile towards the maid. "The airs she gives herself, my dears! She's never been in a house like *this* before, and I for one shouldn't care if she walked out of it bag and baggage, and never showed herself in my kitchen again. Seems she's 'ad twelve years service with a ladyship, and it's turned 'er 'ead like. Only been with Miss Freda a week and don't think much of the place neither. Miss Freda's never 'ad a maid before, not all of 'er own, so she's got to put 'er up to things. That's what she *says*. Quite polite, you know. Thinks she's doing us a good turn by letting us into secrets. I say, dearies, what *is* she like—Miss Freda? I *do* 'ope Master Fred 'asn't made a mistake. I *should* like to see her, and judge for myself."

"We'll bring her to see you, Cooky," said Elsie. "She's sweetly pretty, and very nice. Don't listen to what Parker says."

"Not me!" said Cooky, with a snort. "I'll take down her proud sperrit too, if she gives us any more patronising. I was with a ladyship myself, before I came to Watermeads—kitchen-maid, as I've told you, dearies—and I know all about it."

It was Mrs. Conway who had decided that they were to 'live more like other people' for the week of Freda's visit. "I may be accused of inconsistency," she had said. "No doubt I shall be. But I do not wish comparisons to be made between ourselves and people of German extraction who have made money in business. Miss Blumenthal, no doubt, is used to a high state of luxury. Luxury she will not get here; a suitable way of living she shall. I do not choose it to be said that the advantages of this marriage, if it takes place, are on our side."

"No good trying to cut a dash before the girl Fred is going to marry, mother," her husband had replied. "She'd better know us as we are. Nothing to be ashamed of in our poverty, you know. If she represents the money, we represent something else that you can't buy for money. I should leave it alone if I were you."

But Mrs. Conway had refused to let it alone. The view that she took of the whole affair—a view, however, which she imparted to nobody—was that the 'something else,' represented by Watermeads, and the respectable standing of the Conway family, *could* be bought for money; and she looked upon this only child of a rich man as a bidder. If she was in love with Fred, and was herself presentable, so much the better. But that Watermeads had not counted in her acceptance

of his suit she had never believed. She did not believe it now, though Freda was as pleasing to her as any girl that Fred might have presented as his affianced bride. The outward expression of her views simply lay in presenting Watermeads with as much dignity as could be managed without going quite away from the established state of things, but behind it was the idea of a bargain to be struck. The advantages of the other side must not be allowed an undue prominence.

Anything like a formal dinner-party as a recognition of Freda was out of the question. But supper at nine was to give place to dinner at eight, and one or two particular friends were to be asked to dine. For the rest there was to be a succession of tennis parties, which would provide more amusement, lasting over a longer period, than a formal garden-party.

The guests on the first evening were the Vicar, Olivia, Bellamy and Edward Probert. The last named had established his position as an intimate friend of the house, and Bellamy had enjoyed those privileges almost ever since he had known them. Nothing was hidden from those two of the poverty of the land. None of the four guests would come expecting anything but a simple family meal not at all elaborately served.

They assembled in the hall, and waited till ten minutes past the hour before Freda put in her appearance. But the time did not lag. They were all friends together, with plenty to say to one another.

Fred had not seen Olivia since her return, and the greeting between them was of the most cordial. They had known each other throughout the whole of their childhood and early youth, and their joint memories

were legion. Olivia looked lovely, in one of her smartest gowns, of which she still had ample store. "I should never have recognised you," was Fred's first speech, and she blushed a little, but was soon talking to him just as she had used to talk, with the frankness and affection that had made her like another sister to him.

They were standing together by the door which led into the inner hall. The door was open, and Elsie, who was also standing near it, looked up and saw Freda at the head of the stairs. She was dressed in diaphanous pink, a radiant fairy figure, and Elsie gazed at her entranced as she stood for a moment before descending, a sweet smile on her face.

Then her eye went back instinctively to Olivia, whose dark beauty shone like a star. The glance at Olivia was only momentary, and she looked back at Freda, now descending the stairs. Freda's eyes were on Fred and Olivia, and her mouth, drawn down at the corners, was positively ugly. The next moment she had made her entry, and was smiling again, sweetly and rather shyly.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE GARDEN

"Oh, it's all *lovely*, Freddy—*ever* so much nicer than I thought it would be from what you told me."

They were in the garden. There was no moon, but the velvet sky was dusted over with stars. There was enough light for any purposes that the Conways and their guests might have in mind.

Mrs. Conway, in a state of complete and somewhat unusual amiability, consented to brave the night air, and, fortified with a wrap round her head, slowly paced the terrace behind the house with the Vicar. Her husband, smoking his pipe, walked with them for a time. The young people had disappeared into the shadows of the garden, and he would have liked to be with them; but with the coalescing of particles that was going on in the group of them he had become chary of intruding himself. It was their time; his was over. It was only by the accident of his having been cut off from so many of the pursuits that satisfy men of middle-age, and having found his happiness and contentment in the society of his children, that he had kept that illusion of being young himself. But with the real business of youth he had nothing to do; the young men who wanted the society of his daughters certainly wouldn't want his, though they would be perfectly polite to him if he joined them. What he was

determined to spare himself was the pang of being shown by his own dear girls that *they* didn't want him. They were so sweet to him, still, although both of them, apparently, had their feet already on the path that would lead them away from him. They never wanted him to feel out of it. They would often come up to him and slip their arms affectionately into his, and bring him into their circle. They still wanted him to share their pleasures; the time had not yet come when they would show as much affection as ever, but would make transparent little excuses for getting away from him. He wanted to discount that time by getting used to doing without their constant society, and making no claims upon them which might one day come to be rejected, however tenderly. But it was a hard and difficult task, and his heart was very often sore within him.

He watched the seven young people drifting into the deeper shadows of the garden, and saw Fred and Freda detach themselves, while the others still kept together as long as they were in sight. But apparently the odd number of them prevented a satisfactory breaking up, for presently Rose and Olivia and Bellamy found their way back to the terrace again. And then his little Rose poured balm on him by saying: "We've come to fetch you, Daddy." She took hold of the lapels of his coat and lifted her face for a kiss. Well, if he was wanted he would go happily enough. His wife had her audience and would prefer that he should be out of the way. *She* never wanted him, if she could get anybody else to talk to.

Rose put her arm into his, and all four of them

strolled off together. But presently she stooped down to take a stone out of her slipper, while the others waited for her; and when she had done it she walked by Olivia's side for a time. By and by Olivia was walking with him, and Rose with Bellamy, and finally it was Olivia and he, talking together, who had moved apart from the other two, and the coupling was complete.

He was rather amused by it, for it seemed all wrong, except for Fred and Freda. He liked talking to Olivia, who was almost as much at home with him as his own daughters, and had a fuller mind, and more experience, than either of them. But why wasn't Probert with her? And why wasn't Bellamy with Elsie? Perhaps there had been one of those very slight misunderstandings that vary the monotony of incipient attraction. There was a sense of relief in it to him, too. He liked and respected Bellamy, and the feeling with which he regarded him in conjunction with Elsie was very different from that which he had towards Jack Kirby and Rose. If those two should come to an agreement it would give him pleasure, for by that time he would have taken the fence, which would be the first conviction of Elsie's heart having been given away, and her mind filled with the figure of another man. It was because he dreaded taking the fence that he welcomed however short a respite. He liked Bellamy, but felt happier that he should be walking in the shadows with Rose rather than with Elsie—just for this one evening.

As for Rose, he felt happy about her too, since she was not walking in the shadows with Jack Kirby.

Olivia puzzled him a little. He could regard her with clearer eyes than was possible in the case of his

own daughters, for the jealousy of a father did not throw them out of focus. He knew how tender and responsive she was beneath her self-possessed manner, and would have expected her to show some trace of being touched by that imagined misunderstanding which had parted her from Probert, who so obviously admired her. Perhaps he had not found his way into her heart yet; perhaps it was she who had not wished to make a pair with him, and he was now solacing himself with Elsie's sympathy in his temporary bereavement. He felt sorry for young Edward Probert, and had half an idea of talking to her about him in a fatherly manner, and doing him a good turn with her. But she was talking about Freda, in the kindest possible way, and about what might be expected to come of her marriage with Fred. This was, after all, the chief thing in his mind at the moment, and his heart being in a state of quiescence about Elsie and Rose, it interested him more than Olivia's love affair. He might do something to help that on by and by, if occasion should offer.

Fred had quickly found a corner for himself and Freda where they would be free from interruption from the other ambulatory couples. It was the first time they had been alone together since Freda's introduction to Watermeads, and though Fred's enforced abstinence from love-making during a period of four hours or so was weighing heavily upon him, he was content to vary his protestations by talk of a less ecstatic nature. Freda, indeed, seemed to be rather 'off' love-making for the time. She returned his kisses—some of them—and said 'of course,' when he asked her

if she loved him; but she wanted to talk, and presently he fell into her mood, as he had already learnt to do, and they sat together as staidly as if they were already married, and love-making had ceased to be the hourly food of their lives. This was rather jolly too, in a way. Fred felt his love for her boiling up in him all the time, but also felt that it was worth while to keep its outward expression in abeyance now and then for the sake of the intimate talk which knitted another side of their natures. Before he had reached the stage at which he had been allowed to make love to Freda it was this that had attracted him to her. He could talk to her more easily than to other girls; they had so much more in common. And he had even gone to the length of supposing within himself that their whole lives could not be made up of love-making, and falling back upon a happy affectionate intercourse of mind, as upon something that would last for ever, and even become a still greater pleasure as the years went by.

He was delighted with Freda's warm appreciation of the home into which he had introduced her. "Of course I think it's the nicest place in the world," he said, "but I didn't like to say too much about it, for fear you'd be disappointed. If we had had the money to keep it up there wouldn't have been any doubt; but of course we can't live like other people do who have big country houses; we can't live like you do yourself at Hillstead. I was afraid the difference might come home to you too much. You make me awfully happy, darling, in not thinking too much about it. You're just perfect in the way you look at things."

It did indeed give him much pleasure that Freda was not affected by the poverty that did so much to contract the amenities of Watermeads. The idea had once or twice crossed his mind that she was inclined to rate too highly the state of wealth in which she lived at home, and it was gratifying to have this sure proof that he had been mistaken. He thought she deserved a kiss for the fresh proof of her perfection of character, and gave her one, which she returned rather absent-mindedly.

"Freddy dear," she said. "I wish you'd tell me something. You know quite well that *I* don't think anything of people being poor. I'm not like that. But do other people—I mean the County people you call them, don't you?—who live about here? You see I've never really visited at a country house before—I mean a *real* country house, where the people have nothing to do with business. And I do like to know about things."

"What do you mean exactly, darling?" asked Fred tenderly, enchanted by this new indication of her admirable character. "Of course we can't keep up with the other houses round—in the way of doing things as they do, I mean. But it doesn't make us any less friendly with our neighbours. Most of them have been here as long as we have, or at any rate long enough to know all about us; and the new ones seem just as pleased to see us as anybody. Of course we *are* the Conways of Watermeads still, though we haven't got much money. Is that what you mean?"

"Not exactly, Freddy dear. You see I know that although father is very rich—at least I suppose he is;

I'm always being told so—we are not quite the same as a County family."

She paused for a moment. The expression jarred ever so little upon Fred, but he forgave her instantly, on the reflection that she must have learnt it from her father, whose snobbishness had been made patent since his enagament. "Oh, don't you worry your dear little head about that," he said. "It's *you* that matters, and you're adorable enough for a prince. See how everybody here has taken to you already."

"Yes, everybody has been very sweet to me. I'm so glad, Freddy dear, for *your* sake. But I only wanted to know—you see the people invited to dinner to meet me—well, all of them are *gentlemen*, of course—anybody can see that; but they are two clergymen and an artist, aren't they?—not real County people, I mean."

"But, Freda darling!" expostulated Fred, more taken aback than he liked to admit to himself—"they are our chief friends. It was just like a little family gathering; we can't afford to give regular dinner parties. I told you that, didn't I?"

"Oh, yes, and *please* don't think I'm grumbling. Of course I'd *much* rather meet your *real* friends than the others, however important they may be. I'm the last person to care about that sort of thing. But Mr. Probert and Mr. Bellamy aren't old friends, are they? I thought you hadn't known either of them very long."

"Well, no; but they are the people we see most of just at present. They are both awfully nice fellows, too."

"Oh, yes, I like them both. Besides, from what I can see there's something going on, isn't there? But

I don't want to talk about that. It's just that, however nice they are, they are not what you call County people, are they? That's all I mean."

"I don't know that there's such a hard and fast line between what you call County people and others as you seem to think," said Fred, speaking with less admiration of her in his tone than he had ever used before. "Anyhow, whatever the test may be, both Probert and Bellamy would pass it all right."

"Oh, would they? I don't know anything about them, except that one is a clergyman and the other an artist. Tell me about them, Freddy. I like Mr. Probert especially, and he certainly *does* look as if he was somebody."

"There's nothing much to tell. I believe Probert's father is a baronet, and Bellamy comes from very good people up in the north."

"Is Mr. Probert the eldest son?"

"I don't know. Yes, old Sophia Raine said he was, and his father's very rich. I believe Bellamy's father is rich too, and has a fine place in Cumberland. But Bellamy has an elder brother. Is there anything else you'd like to know, Freda?"

She snuggled up to him. "Don't be angry with me, Freddy darling," she said. "I only ask questions because I want to feel quite sure in my own mind that people aren't looking down upon me. I know *you* wouldn't like that, would you? It's for your sake I want to be quite certain."

He was much touched by this, and ashamed of himself for having shown ill humour towards her. Of course he must trust her in everything. It would be

dreadful if he were to get in the way of feeling annoyance towards her, just like any other man engaged to a girl who was not a perfect Freda. There was never to be anything like that between him and her, and wouldn't be if he always remembered what she was, and that anything she might say that he didn't quite like would always have a right meaning if one searched behind the speech itself.

"Oh, you can be absolutely certain, darling," he said. "I didn't mean to be a beast about Probert and Bellamy. And the Raines are coming to dine tomorrow. They are very old friends."

"That's Lady Sophia, isn't it? Oh, of *course* I know that you are all inclined to treat me awfully well, Freddy darling. It makes me so happy—to feel I'm really wanted. You know I like your mother most awfully. You never told me how nice she was; you hardly ever said anything about her. I had the idea that she was rather—rather formidable."

Fred laughed, and allowed himself a squeeze of her slim waist. "She *is* to people she doesn't like," he said. "It just shows what you are, darling, that she has taken to you. So has the dear old Dad. Isn't he a ripper? He's just as much of a pal as if he were an elder brother."

"Oh, I love him awfully already. He has such distinguished manners, though I *must* say I was rather surprised by his costume when I first saw him." She gave a silvery little laugh. "But I suppose he is above caring what he looks like, and in evening dress *nobody* could mistake him for anything but what he is. Nor your mother, either. She is so stately. I'm afraid I

shall never be like that, Freddy, though I shall try hard to behave as I ought, when I'm mistress of Watermeads."

Fred put this speech aside, as one in which there must be some meaning creditable to Freda which was not apparent on the surface. "You like the girls, too, don't you?" he asked. "They are quite in love with you. Rose told me she never had thought I had such good taste."

"Rose is a darling, and *so* pretty, Freddy. I should be quite jealous of her if you weren't her brother. And I like Elsie, too, awfully. As for Penelope, she's a perfect darling."

"You do see the best in everybody," said Fred fondly. "Penelope isn't a bad little brat, but there's no doubt she is frightfully spoilt, and there are some things in her that want tackling pretty badly. Elsie and Rose do their best, but she doesn't take much notice of them. It would be splendid if you could get an influence over her and improve her a bit."

"Perhaps Elsie and Rose don't know how to treat her. I think she is perfectly sweet as she is. She seems to like me already. She followed me about with her funny solemn eyes, and came after me when I went to my room to dress. I was so glad I'd thought of bringing her a box of chocolates. She thanked me so prettily, and I could see that she hadn't the least idea that I should have brought her anything."

Fred did not feel the same certainty about this, but he did not tell Freda so. It was natural that Penelope should have taken a fancy to one so beautiful

and charming as Freda, since she was human beneath her numerous faults. And she could not have a better model. It was delightful to think of Freda already taking her place as one of the family, and Penelope taking to her as a sister, and benefiting by her sweet example.

He expressed these ideas with admiring gratitude, and Freda said sweetly and modestly: "That is just what I want—to be made one of the family. I shall do my best to help them all. I think Elsie and Rose look perfectly sweet, considering how little they have to dress on; but I know I can do something for them there, if they will let me. I *do* know about clothes, and father always gives me what I want. Freddy, is Mr. Probert likely to fall in love with either of them? That would be a very good match for one of them, wouldn't it? Perhaps I might do something to help it on, if there is any chance of it."

"You dear sweet thing!" said Fred, allowing himself another kiss; "always thinking about what you can do for others! I do love you for it, Freda. But I think it's Olivia that he's likely to fall in love with, if anybody, from what they have written to me."

"Oh, but surely that wouldn't be a suitable match, would it? For him, I mean. Mr. Bonner isn't anybody particular, is he?"

Again that uneasy sense, which Fred had to stifle. "I should think Olivia would be good enough for anybody," he said, a shade stiffly. "She's beautiful, and awfully nice, and clever, and as good as gold, too."

Freda showed pettishness. "I believe you're in love with her yourself," she said, drawing away from him. "I don't think she's beautiful at all, only good-looking, in a sort of stuck-up way I don't admire. The first time I set eyes on her I didn't like her, and now I know why."

Fred was completely bowled over by this extraordinary speech, so different from anything that he had ever heard or expected to hear from Freda. But further investigation, during which Freda allowed herself gradually to be brought round, revealed the source of it to be a gratifying jealousy, which touched him immensely. Of *course*, compared to Freda, Olivia could hardly lay claim to beauty of any sort, and at first sight might almost be said to be plain. He couldn't help liking her and admiring her character, and always should do so, as she was almost like a sister to him; but compared to Freda, she was nothing to him whatever. Surely Freda darling must know that! It must be obvious to everybody.

Freda darling begged pardon very prettily for a little display of jealousy which she had not been able to help. "But I don't like her, all the same, Freddy dear," she said. "I am sure she is designing, and we shall see by and by if I'm not right. But we needn't talk about her any more. I'm quite satisfied that you don't care for her, and I was very silly to think that you did. I'll give you a kiss to show that I'm sorry. There now! I think we won't stay here any longer. They will all wonder where we've got to."

So the little disturbance was most sweetly healed, and as they walked slowly back to the house again,

under the spangled ceiling of night, Fred felt that he was indeed the happiest of men to have this adorable girl hanging on his arm, and the prospect of spending his life with her before him.

pipe-clayed. But he looked like a gentleman in this costume, which Lord Kirby would not have done.

"I've come over to have a little talk with you about my boy and your girl," said Lord Kirby with admirable directness.

Sydney looked down suddenly. He had expected anything but this. There was a question having to do with their adjoining properties, which he had so far only discussed with Lord Kirby's agent. If he had not had it in his mind that Lord Kirby's visit was to settle that up, he might have suspected something of his purpose, with his mind so frequently running on Jack Kirby and Rose. But the small shock was none the less unpleasant.

As Sydney did not say anything in reply to the announcement, Lord Kirby proceeded in his confident, rather patronising, but not unpleasant manner. "I want to see my boy married," he said. "He isn't very old, but I like early marriages, especially where there's a good deal concerned, as there is in his case. I want him to bring me a nice girl as a daughter-in-law, and if he brings me the right one I don't fancy she'll have much to complain of in *my* treatment of her. I've taken a very great fancy to your little Rose, Mr. Conway, and I assure you that it has given me great pleasure—very great pleasure indeed—to find that my boy has taken a great fancy to her, too. Ha! ha! Now I don't think it's such a bad thing to treat these matters in an old-fashioned way, and for the parents to agree on them before the young people fix it up for themselves. That's why I've come over to have a little chat about it."

He had really come over because he was so excited at the idea of Jack proposing to Rose, which Jack under pressure had admitted to him was in his mind, that he wanted to talk about it. For there was nothing for him to arrange with Rose's father. He knew that she would probably come penniless, and if not he didn't care; and as for any difficulty about the match from the Conway side, it had never entered his head that they would accept it with anything but hymns and paeans of joy.

But Sydney's face did not exactly express jubilation, as he came to the end of his introductory remarks, and Lord Kirby was somewhat surprised by its expression, and inclined to wonder whether the golden offer he was so generously making had been quite understood by this odd unsuccessful man, for whom he had a feeling between contempt and pity.

He would have been still more surprised if he had had any idea of the storm of anger and resentment that had been aroused by his speech, and was raging so hotly in Sydney's mind that he was quite incapable for the moment of making any reply to it whatever. Upon the suggested marriage itself he had long since made up his mind. Much as he personally disliked young Jack, he must not allow his dislike to appear, if Rose accepted him. He could bring forward no adequate reason for refusing parental consent, and to show distaste for Rose's future husband would only have the effect of parting him still further from Rose. But he had clung, perhaps more than he knew, to the hope that Rose would not in the long run accept Jack Kirby, and here he was being asked to welcome and

CHAPTER XIV

WILL SHE DO?

"WELL, my dear Jane, of course the girl is suburban and middle-class and second rate, and all that sort of thing, and I've a strong suspicion that she's a minx besides, but I think she'll do. I congratulate you."

Lady Sophia Raine was alone with Mrs. Conway. The night being as warm and still as the last, Colonel Raine was smoking with Sydney on the terrace, and the girls were with them. Fred and Freda had lost themselves in the garden, as before.

Mrs. Conway digested her friend's surprising speech; or, rather, made a preliminary effort to swallow it, but without success.

"I don't know why you say that of her," she said. "Her manners strike me as particularly good, and nobody could possibly find any fault with her appearance, or her dress. Why do you say that she is second-rate?"

"Well, she shows a disposition to address me as Lady Raine, for one thing, which is always a sign. But she'll learn all that sort of thing quickly enough, and there's nothing in it. I said she'd do, and I meant it."

"I must confess," said Mrs. Conway ponderously, "that the way she takes trouble to commend herself to me pleases me. I don't know why I should be

ashamed of it. I have a right to expect, perhaps, that I should get consideration in my own house, but the fact is that I do not always receive it. I sometimes think——"

"Oh, yes, of course she *would* pay attention to you. She will be very careful to get herself in—with everybody that she thinks matters at all. She doesn't know whether I matter or not yet, but as I've got a title she thinks I probably do, and anyhow it won't hurt her to be civil. When she's got herself in, and has what she wants, so that nobody can take it away from her, the minx will come out. But by that time you will have got all you want, too, so it needn't disturb you. It's Fred who will have to tackle that, and he won't see through her for many a long day. She's quite pretty enough to hold any man, if she takes a little trouble about it."

"Really, Sophia, you do let your tongue run away with you!" exclaimed Mrs. Conway, in some offence. "Pray what is it that *we* want, except that Fred shall be happy with the girl he has chosen?"

"We want her money, Jane. I say 'we,' because not having any children of my own I take more interest in yours than in any other young people. In fact, I look upon them almost as my own, especially Fred, who is my godson. If I have any money to leave I shall probably leave it to him. But it won't be much, unless George dies before me and leaves me all his. But anyhow that's a long way off yet, and we needn't talk about it. Well, I've found out all about the Blumenthal man, and there's no doubt that he's immensely rich,—and rich in a solid businesslike kind of way that

doesn't mean he'll be immensely poor tomorrow. This girl is his only child, and if he is properly handled I should think he would give her all the money that's necessary as long as he's alive, and leave her a large fortune when he dies."

"Well, of course the money side of the question cannot be left out altogether."

"Oh, no. It's the only one that really matters. I shouldn't have liked Fred to marry only for the sake of money, at all events while he's young. But he has been sensible enough to fall in love with a girl who has it, and she's quite clever enough, and pretty enough, to carry it off. She'll learn all our little ways in no time, and if she'll watch that mouth of hers a bit, and rely on general all-around amiability as her strong suit, she'll get on very well, and we shan't find much to grumble at in her."

"I don't like to hear you talking in that way of Freda," said Mrs. Conway decisively. She had determined what to say, and to say it in spite of interruption. But Lady Sophia did not interrupt her till she had finished the main part of her speech. She knew that tone, and respected it, within limits. "I am strongly inclined to take to the girl as a daughter," Mrs. Conway proceeded. "The deep affection which is part of my character is apt to be thrown back upon me. I would not say this to anyone but you, and I impute blame to nobody. But, with one exception, my children put little value upon my love for them. They have been taught—I think most wrongly—to disregard their mother. Now I trust to Freda to make up to me something of what I miss. I do not think I am

mistaken in my judgment of her. I know that you go about the world more than I do now, Sophia, but I sometimes think that a woman, not perhaps altogether lacking in natural intelligence, who keeps at home and has much time for thought——"

"Oh, well," interrupted Lady Sophia, at last, "if you are inclined to like the girl, so much the better, Jane. I don't dislike her myself, not in the least. As I said, she'll do very well. But there's not much interest in discussing that side of the question. You ought not to put her above Elsie and Rose, who are each worth six of her, and I don't think you have much to complain of in their treatment of you. But all that is your own affair and has nothing to do with me. What *is* interesting is the money side, and if you and Sydney—especially Sydney—play your cards well, you'll get all you want to put Watermeads back into its proper place as one of the great houses of the neighbourhood, and yourselves with it."

"I can't imagine what you have in your mind, Sophia," said Mrs. Conway, ruffled at being told her duty with regard to her daughters. "Mr. Blumenthal may be as rich as you say—I have not made it my business to enquire—but——"

"Well, I think you ought to have done—either you or Sydney—but you're both of you thoroughly unpractical in money matters. However, you have friends who are pleased to give themselves a little trouble on your account, and I did make it my business to enquire; and the result of my enquiries is quite satisfactory. Now what you have to remember, Jane—you and Sydney—and it's rather important—is that

you have a good deal to offer on your side. You are rather too fond of abasing yourself because of your lack of means, and what I want to impress upon you is that that isn't at all the line to take in this case."

"A decent poverty," began Mrs. Conway, but Lady Sophia was now fully launched, and not inclined to tarry in her course for discussion.

"Oh, yes, I know all about that," she said. "When you are dealing with people of our own sort you can talk as much as you like about decent poverty. I think myself that you overdo it, and it makes people uncomfortable about something they wouldn't bother about at all if you would let them alone. But my point is that with these Blumenthals you want to forget it altogether. You have a good old name, a fine house, a large property, and those are the things you must keep in the foreground. A new rich man like this might buy the land and the house if it suited him, but he couldn't buy the name and all that it stands for. *He* knows that well enough, and he isn't likely to under-rate the name either. That sort of person thinks a great deal more about that sort of thing than we do. Now—please don't interrupt me—my point is this: Mr. Blumenthal can't expect his daughter to cut a dash as mistress of Watermeads for some time to come, in the natural course of things, but there's no reason why she shouldn't hitch herself on to it, with the money he ought to give her, from the first. You've turned your dower-house into a farm. Very well, turn it back again, for the young couple. Let them live there, in a manner fitting for the wealth they will have, and let Fred spend money on the place, and get it back

to what it used to be. That's reasonable enough, and Blumenthal ought to see it, if he's properly dealt with. *You* will benefit as long as Sydney is alive, for if he doesn't have to put all the money he gets from the place back into it, you'll have more to spend; and Fred and his wife will benefit too, for they will step straight into a well kept-up property instead of a dilapidated one. It will be a good bargain for all concerned."

It all appeared highly reasonable to Mrs. Conway, and she wondered that her husband hadn't thought of it before. "If I could trust Sydney to do the sensible thing," she said.

"I shouldn't trust Sydney to do anything. Sydney is a very good fellow—nobody has a greater liking for him than I have—but he's hopeless where anything like negotiation is wanted. The way he gave in to George about those fishing rights! I told George that it was like taking advantage of a baby, and he ought to be ashamed of himself. But he said that Sydney threw everything at his head, and he got more than he wanted before he asked for anything. No, leave Sydney out of it, Jane, and do it yourself. You have the character; you only go wrong now because you concentrate all your efforts on twopenny halfpenny little things that don't matter, like docking the servants of their butter. *You* talk to Blumenthal, when affairs come to be settled, and don't forget that it's *you* who are giving most in this marriage, and not him."

"I dare say I could put the case clearly, if I am permitted to do so," said Mrs. Conway. "The idea of settling Fred and Freda at Watermeads is certainly

a good one; but you forget that Fred is now engaged to work for his uncle, Mark Drake. He will have to live in London."

"Oh, my dear Jane, that is just where your imagination is so limited. Mark Drake has seen this girl, and approved of her—or rather of her money, which he has certainly found out all about, unless he's a very different Mark Drake from the one I used to know. Do you think *he* will stand in the way of anything that is for Fred's benefit, especially as it will relieve him of any obligation to provide money himself, which he was always very close with? If he wants Fred, what is to prevent them having a flat or a little house in London as well? He couldn't possibly give him enough to do to prevent his spending the greater part of his time here. Oh, no; you needn't expect opposition from Mark Drake. It's whether you are strong enough to crack the hard nut that Blumenthal is likely to be that I'm doubtful about. I wish I had the doing of it myself. I should like to pit myself against a successful man of business. I think he would admit that he had met his match, after we had finished."

Mrs. Conway privately thought that she herself was as capable of dealing with a man of business as Sophia Raine, but her respect for her friend's capabilities led her to turn over in her mind the advice she had received, and to act upon some of it. Her own feeling in the matter had prompted her to refrain from dwelling so much on the note of poverty before Freda, as has already been said, but she now determined to dispense with its over-familiar tone altogether, and to

take a higher line with Freda than she had yet done, while still retaining the approving quality of her attitude towards her. She also made up her mind to write privately to Mr. Blumenthal and suggest an interview. She would ask him to run down—it was only a three hours' journey—on the day after next, when the whole family would be out on a picnic. She had intended to make one of the party herself, but could easily find an excuse for staying behind; and when they returned in the evening she would have something to tell them. Her husband would see,—all of them would see,—what could be done to put affairs on a right footing, if she for once had them entirely in her own hands. And perhaps, afterwards, a little more attention would be paid to her opinions, which were apt to be dealt with in a spirit of banter that she found it difficult to support with patience.

It must not be supposed, from Lady Sophia's outspoken criticism of Freda, that that charming young person had done anything in the first clear day of her visit to lessen the good impression she had already made. Lady Sophia criticised everybody, and the fact that Freda had once inadvertently addressed her as Lady Raine, and seldom addressed her at all without tacking on a 'Lady Sophia' to her speech, was quite enough to account for Lady Sophia's setting down of her as second-rate. It is true that she had seized upon the shape of Freda's mouth as tending to qualify confidence in the entire amiability of her manner; but nobody else had yet noticed that, except for a brief moment Elsie, who had since forgotten it, and it was no doubt Lady Sophia's habit of pushing all her discov-

eries to their limit that had led her to advance the opinion that Freda was essentially a minx.

An hour had been spent after breakfast in going over the house. At this time of the day Mrs. Conway was much immersed in household affairs, and Elsie and Rose were expected to 'help' her. This they always did with a serene good humour that was proof against the annoyance of much waste of time devoted to argument of small points. If Mrs. Conway had been content to sit in her parlour and give her orders, the girls would have carried them out, with the help of the servants, in half the time that it took to get through what had to be done. But it was only in the afternoon that Mrs. Conway took up her position as one apart from domestic affairs. In the morning she descended into details, as she thought to be required of her in the state to which her establishment had been reduced. She was, indeed, wholly admirable in the way in which she did her best to stem the always rising tide of money difficulties, by doing herself many things that she would have preferred to leave to servants. If her ability had been equal to her will, the burden of poverty would hardly have weighed on Watermeads at all, as far as domestic arrangements were concerned.

The great hall and the dining-room Freda had already seen, but some attention was given to the pictures in both these apartments. Some of them were by great artists; others were said to be, and amongst them the putative Holbein. This was a noble portrait, whoever it was by, of a sad faced woman in black, who, however, was not an ancestress. "We don't go so far back as that," said Sydney. I don't

know what we were in those days—yeoman farmers, I fancy. I shall look it all up some day. There's only a missing tombstone between us and the Conways of Vale, who were wiped out in the Wars of the Roses. Great swells, they were. We began with Grandfather Robert, who founded Conway's Bank in the reign of James I. I wish we had stuck to the bank. We should have been amongst the highest, but I don't know that it would have made much difference to us after all. Here is Grandfather Robert, with his snub nose. We called Bobby after him chiefly because he had a snub nose as a baby. But as you see it has since improved in shape. Still, I think we'll make a banker of Bobby, all the same. He can get rich and found another branch of the family."

"I have made up my mind to be an explorer," said Bobby. "Last winter I slept several times on the floor, and one morning when I woke up there was ice in my water-jug."

"Well, that's a good beginning," said his father. "Very well, Bobby, you shall be an explorer."

"I think you'll make a splendid explorer," said Freda admiringly. "You look so strong, and as if you could stand a good deal of hardship."

"I am going to be a soldier," said Billy, unwilling that Bobby should draw to himself more than his fair share of this gratifying attention. "I shall work hard and become a General."

"That will be lovely, Billy," said Freda. "It will make me very proud to have a General as a brother-in-law."

"Do explorers and Generals have dirty nails?"

asked Penelope sweetly. Bobby and Billy threw looks of baffled hate towards her. They were in a constant state of warfare with Penelope, and were at present at the height of a feud in which they were always being worsted.

"Don't be rude, Mother Bunch," said Sydney. But Freda drew her towards her and kissed her, with a laugh. "She doesn't mean to be rude," she said, "but only funny. *I* know well enough that manly boys can't always be expected to keep their hands like a girl's."

"This is Grandfather William—Billy was called after him—who gave up the bank and settled down at Watermeads as a country gentleman. And this is his wife, Lady Penelope; Mother Bunch was called after her. We always suspected that it was Grandmother Penelope who persuaded Grandfather William to give up the bank. She was a lady of title, and no doubt thought the City was low. Their son, Grandfather Frederick—Fred was called after him—the paint peeled off his nose, and he has been relegated to the billiard-room, where you will see him—also married a lady of title, in fact a Duke's daughter. Sir Joshua painted her, and I'm sorry to say she has gone out of the family. But there's a print of the picture somewhere. You see we were quite high up in those days, Freda. But the Duke's daughter was the culminating point. We couldn't keep it up at that pitch."

"I'm afraid *I* shall be rather a come-down after the two ladies of title," said Freda with arch sweetness.

"My dear, you're better than any of them," said Sydney. "We'll have you painted by Sargent, and

you'll make up for the Sir Joshua that we've lost."

Freda blushed and looked pleased. Fred squeezed her arm, and told her that she would make a much prettier picture than the Sir Joshua.

Freda was much impressed by the great drawing-room, the library, and the ball-room, all opening out of one another and occupying the front of one-half of the ground floor. It was long since any of these rooms had been used, except the ball-room, where badminton and other games were played in wet weather. The furniture was mostly covered up, and there were more signs of dilapidations in the framework of the rooms themselves than in other parts of the house. But they were splendid rooms, proportioned and decorated with all the skill of the early eighteenth century, and Freda was loud in her expressions of admiration. She made light of the somewhat depressing signs of decay that were everywhere apparent, and in such a way that Fred squeezed her arm again as a token of how well he understood the way in which she identified herself with the family's happy way of taking its misfortunes, and how grateful he felt for it.

But his father turned away a little abruptly. "Now we will go to the rooms we do keep up," he said. "They are not so fine, but we manage to make ourselves happy in them."

The parlour was panelled and carved and plastered —a charming restful room in which there were numerous signs of the family's occupation, and few of anything more than a constant use of old furnishings. But Freda went a trifle off the track here in her ad-

miring comments. She had little to say about the perfect panelling, except that it must make the room rather dark in the winter, and suggested, as a luminous idea, that there was quite enough good stuff left in the brocaded curtains of the great drawing-room to permit of their being adapted for the parlour.

Fred again thought that she was behaving extraordinarily well in being ready to adapt herself to the unfortunate necessities of Conway contrivance, since she could have had small experience of such adaptations. But Sydney said rather stiffly: "They wouldn't be in keeping with this room; and these do very well."

A visit was paid to the back regions, partly because they were in the oldest part of the house and there were architectural features to be shown, partly for the purpose of introducing Freda to the cook.

Mrs. Conway was sitting in the kitchen swathed in a large white apron. She was arguing majestically about the respective prices of coke and coal, with Elsie, Rose and the cook standing before her, and endeavouring to explain to her that they agreed with every word she said. She left off when the exploratory party made its incursion, and changed her expression of offended *hauteur* into one of stately welcome, as her eyes fell upon Freda.

"You mustn't mind seeing me directing household affairs in this way," she said in allusion to her apron, which she proceeded to take off. "If I did not see to things myself nothing would go right. However, I have finished now, and have time to pay you some attention, Freda. I should like you to notice this range. We use very little of it, as you see, but if we were to

use it all it would take a quarter of a ton of coal a day."

Freda threw a hurried complimentary glance at the kitchen range, but Sydney was already in process of introducing her to the cook, who stood, a solid bulwark of comfortable womanhood, wiping her hands on her apron, and smiling all over her broad face.

"Well, I'm sure, Miss, this *is* a pleasure," she said, shaking hands with Freda and looking at her admiringly. "I did 'ave a peep at you last night as you was setting at dinner, and I said to myself 'Bless your pretty face! Mr. Fred's got the right one in you, *I* know.' And you got the right one in him, you know, Miss. But there! I can't tell you what I feel about that."

The simple soul turned away to wipe her eyes, which were welling with sympathy and affection. Freda had omitted to prepare a speech for her, and was somewhat at a loss in face of this emotion. "I'm sure I'm very pleased to meet you," she said, with the sweetest of smiles, and then turned to exclaim at the kitchen range and its capacity for the consumption of fuel.

CHAPTER XV

A TENNIS PARTY

"Now, Freddy dear, we must behave ourselves this afternoon. We must just make ourselves two of the family party. We shall have our lovely time together in the garden this evening. This afternoon I'm hardly going to take any notice of you at all."

It was still the first day of Freda's visit. Olivia and some others were coming to play tennis, and Probert and Bellamy were to be of the party as usual.

"Well, of course we're all going to be jolly together," said Fred, somewhat dashed in spirit by his enslaver's announcement; "but I don't see why you shouldn't take any notice of me. We can play together, and sometimes we can have a little stroll. None of the others will mind."

"No, but I shall," said Freda decisively. "I'm going to be one of the family, and I want to cultivate the family friends."

"You don't mean you are going to devote yourself to Probert and Bellamy!"

Freda gave him an affectionate and proprietary kiss. "Was the darling a little jel-jel?" she said fondly. "I rather like that, Freddy, because it shows how much you love me. But you needn't be, in this case, you know. You've only got to look in the glass and compare yourself with Mr. Probert and Mr. Bel-

lamy to see who *I* should be likely to devote myself to, even if I hadn't done it already."

Fred was inclined to like this method of treatment, and, in order to provoke an extension of it, said: "Well, Probert is a good deal better looking fellow than I am, and Bellamy's all right, too. I don't know why you should prefer me to them, if it comes to that."

Freda assured him, in the gratifying way known to lovers, that no man in the wide world could equal him. When she had done this she reannounced her intention. "You see, darling," she said, with her hand in his, "I do so want to be a good sister to Elsie and Rose, if they will let me. I am so happy in my own love affair that I should like to help them in theirs."

Fred was overcome by a sense of rapture at this new proof of the treasure he had secured for himself. "I wish I could say all that I think about you, darling," he said simply. "You're so much better than I am. I suppose you want to have me to yourself as much as I want you——"

"Why, of course I do, Freddy."

"——and yet you can think about others, which I'm afraid is beyond me, though I ought to do it when it's my own sisters. But as far as Probert is concerned, I don't think you need worry yourself. You wouldn't want to help him on with Olivia. You said so yourself."

"That's just where you're as blind as the rest of them, dearest. I think I can see a little further. I want to find out if it really *is* Olivia he comes here for. I have my own suspicions on that subject."

"Why? Do you think it is one of the girls?"

"Never mind what I think. I'll tell you what I think this evening when we have our happy time together. But I'll tell you one thing: Olivia can't hold a candle to Rose, in good looks or anything else, and if I were a man I wouldn't *look* at Olivia if Rose was anywhere about."

Fred was inclined to regret the way in which Freda spoke of Olivia, whom he had always admired, and towards whom his feelings were hardly less affectionate than towards his own sisters. Neither did he think that Rose, with all her beauty, impartially viewed, was so obviously superior to Olivia. Still, it was gratifying that Freda should not be capable of taking a wholly impartial view when it was a question between his sister and another girl, and with her love for himself putting once more so completely to shame his own unworthy little jealousies, he was not inclined to press his own view of Olivia as against hers.

"Well, darling," he said, "you find out what is happening, and tell me all about it this evening. But don't be *too* nice to Probert and Bellamy, because although I trust *you—absolutely*, I couldn't be so sure of either of them. You might upset your own ideas, you know."

Only one tennis court was kept going at Watermeads, and it had come to be the custom among the young people who used it so frequently during this fine summer to alternate their games with little strolls around, whether in the direction of strawberry beds and raspberry canes or along the shady walks of the overgrown garden. Probert and Bellamy had been constantly of the party, but there had been others, too,

young men and girls from houses round, and the pairings had given rise to some conjectures, and occasionally to little comedies of incipient attraction and even of jealousy. There had not been for some years such a succession of visitors at Watermeads. It had become the stage for the charming play of youth, and never in its best days had the setting been more fit for the occasion. Mrs. Conway had apparently resigned herself to the extra expense and service involved in providing tea for a family almost daily reinforced from outside, and made no trouble about any extra number up to seven. Beyond that it was a 'party,' and that she 'would not have.' But fourteen could sit comfortably round the table in the hall, and had done so once or twice a week throughout the summer months, to say nothing of other days, in which a smaller number had come, to play their games seriously, and perhaps with the hope of increasing intimacies that were already the happiest things in their lives.

There was the large beautiful house smiling across its lawns and meadows in the hot sunshine, showing nothing of the wounds that time was gradually dealing it; the spacious gardens, in which nature did so much to make up for the enforced absence of human care; the meal, sacramental to friendship in its sufficing simplicity, in the great hall, which still gave out its aroma of tranquil dignity. Love-making in such surroundings would provide memories, which no increase of wealth or state could better. But until the arrival of Fred and Freda there had been no direct love-making among those who came together there

through the afternoons and evenings of that happy summer, but only the warm friendships that might lead to love, as the probings and testings yielded their results, and whatever inner charm of mind and spirit that lay behind the outer charm of appearance and manner stole out to find its lover and its mate.

It speaks well for Fred's faith in his beloved that when he saw Freda and Probert detach themselves from the group of those watching the set in which he was playing, and stroll off towards the shrubbery walks, the fire of his service should not have been diminished nor the quickness of his retorts at the net suffered. He would have liked to be in Probert's place rather than to partner Olivia in a game against Elsie and Bellamy; but his time would come in the sweet garden dusk later on; and it would be very interesting, in intervals of love-making, to hear what Freda had discovered about the mysterious influences that were acting all around.

Edward Probert, now admitted to close intimacy with the Conway family, and inclined to like Fred not a little, as Fred liked him, had offered Freda frank congratulations, and was prepared to like her too, and to treat her with whatever friendly familiarity her engaged state might leave her leisure and inclination to respond to. He thought it rather nice of her to invite him to a short garden ramble. It was in the way of things at Watermeads, and showed her agreeably willing to suit herself to it with the rest. The more she joined in with them in all the little habits that made them so friendly together, the more she would

make herself part of the charming family into which she was to marry, and, incidentally, the more she would dilute the slight awkwardness felt in a group of young people when two of them have their minds filled only with each other.

It was the most natural thing, in view of these surroundings, and the part that Freda would come to play in them, that Edward should have begun the conversation with praise of Watermeads.

"This is a jolly place, isn't it?" he said. "I don't think I've ever enjoyed coming to a house more than I do to this; and they make you feel so at home."

"Oh, yes, they're dears," said Freda, "and of course it's a beautiful place; but it's so sad to see everything going to ruin."

Probert laughed. "I don't think it's quite so bad as that," he said. "Anyhow, it doesn't show up as far as we're concerned. I'm not sure it doesn't make it rather jollier."

"I'm afraid I can't agree with you there," said Freda primly. "One makes the best of things, of course, but I've been used to seeing things so different. All the time I'm wanting Watermeads to be like other big houses. And it *could* be, you know, with some money spent on it."

Probert cast a glance at his companion—rather a doubtful one. She was pretty enough, certainly, and beautifully dressed—a girl that any young man might be pleased to stroll and chat with, even if his chief interest in girlhood lay elsewhere. But——

"Were you brought up in a large country house, Mr. Probert?" she was asking him with a smile invit-

ing to intimacy, before his doubts had had time to resolve themselves.

"Well, yes, I was," he said, inclined to wonder why the question was asked.

"Do tell me about it," she said. "I love hearing about houses; they're a sort of passion of mine. That's why it distresses me to see a fine place like this not properly kept up."

Oh, then she was all right, if that was it. He gave her a description of his beautiful home in Norfolk, laying more stress upon the sporting amenities of its surroundings than upon the features of the house itself. But she brought him continually back to the house, with laughing emphasis upon her personal tastes, and got from him a mass of detail as to number and size of rooms, and the contents of the chief ones, that would have provided very fair material for a house-agent's catalogue. She made such agreeable fun of her questions that he quite entered into her spirit. She showed a particular interest in the domestic arrangements of the house, and helped him to count up the number of servants, male and female, employed in it. When she had extorted enough information about the interior, she allowed him to take her over the gardens and the home-farm, in imagination. They also visited the stables in the same spirit, and she was anxious to know about cottages and accommodation for men working on the place, whether married or single.

When he had satisfied her enquiring spirit as to his boyhood's home, she demanded the same details as to his present one, and found him quite willing to pro-

vide such information as she had shown him that she liked to have, without so many promptings from her. He seemed, indeed, more interested for the moment in Lutterbourne Rectory than in Hayslope Hall, and was significantly willing to regard it, not as a convenient house for a bachelor, but as a house that a woman might take an interest in.

Lutterbourne Rectory revealed itself as a large old-fashioned house of red brick, well proportioned and conveniently arranged for family use. It had a very beautiful garden, and its acreage of glebe was such that it was possible, to an incumbent with the necessary means and tastes, to treat it as a country house in little, with park, home-farm, cottages and everything complete.

"I'm very lucky to get such a place," said the young Rector. "Of course I could have taken a house something like it, and enjoyed myself in it without doing anything else; but I shouldn't have done that yet awhile if I hadn't taken Orders. I should have gone into the army, or something."

"I wonder you didn't do that, rather than go into the church," said Freda. "I should have thought it would have suited you much better."

"Well, no it wouldn't. You see I like a country life and all the things we've been talking about. Besides, though I don't talk much about the parson side of the question, it counts for something, you know. I really like being a parson."

His good-looking young face had become a shade more serious. He would perhaps have liked to say something to this pretty sympathetic girl, who was

taking such an interest in the details of his life, past, present and future, about a side of it that meant more to him than was apparent on the surface. But Freda said, with a laugh: "Oh, well, it must be rather nice to be a parson when it means living in such a charming house as yours seems to be. I suppose you won't live there always, though."

"I shall for a good many years to come, I hope." He was a little chilled by her refusal to accept his own measure of his profession. Like so many young men who take Orders with the prospect of a pleasant country living before them, and a pleasant country life, he had found himself involved, during his years of training, in more serious views of his profession than he had allowed for, or than one in his position would have been likely to meet with a generation earlier. As prospective heir to large estates and fortune, it had seemed right to him that he should carry out his original intention, and use only the intervening years in the active exercise of his profession. It was either that or spending them in pursuits less beneficial to mankind. As a country parson he would be living the life that suited him, but it would have a wider, more satisfying basis than if he lived it for no end but his own pleasure. He had worked hard during the five years since his ordination, in a poor London parish, and was entering upon the fortunate fruits of his labours with a conscience clear of offence. Nevertheless, he was inclined to be a little shy of comparisons, and anxious to do the work he had to do, for which the accidents of English Church patronage paid him so handsomely, as well as it could be done.

"There's no resident squire at Lutterbourne, you know," he said, half in self-defence. "There's a lot to be done in a parish like that, though there are only seven hundred inhabitants all told. It's the parson who has to do most of it. I might perhaps come to think that I ought to take a parish where there would be more work to do, but at present I'm quite satisfied where I am."

"Oh, I should think so," said Freda. "Until you succeed to your property you couldn't have a nicer place."

He passed this over, with a slight sense of distaste. Freda would have been considerably surprised if she had known that allowances were being made for her because she was known to be what this well-born and well-mannered young man described to himself as 'not quite.'

Her heart seemed to be in the right place, though, even if the questions and allusions she permitted herself were not beyond the reproach of lack of taste. She told him that for herself a quiet life in a country rectory seemed almost the ideal state. There was so much one could do to help others, and so much of a clergyman's work that a clergyman's wife could help him in. She even said that she wished Fred was a clergyman, which might have given something of a shock to this young man's credulity if she had not spoken about it all so nicely, and entered so sympathetically into what he had told her of his daily duties. At the end of the interview, when their path had led them round to the tennis-lawn again, Edward Probert felt that this was a charming well-disposi-

tioned girl, whom his friend was fortunate to have secured for a bride. Her little 'snaggeries'—this was a favourite word of his—would soon disappear in the larger atmosphere to which she was being introduced, and there would be nothing left but her extremely attractive appearance and her loyal sound nature. It pleased him also to think that in the natural course of things she would be a neighbour of his own for some years to come. One could get on with the wives of one's neighbours if they were of that sort, and when one had a wife of one's own——. Here his thoughts left Freda and took other channels.

Freda had other strolls with other members of the party during the afternoon, and even relented in her firm decision and invited Fred to one.

"Well, what did you find out about Edward?" he asked her with some eagerness, when they were out of earshot of the rest.

She hung fire for a moment, and then said:

"My dear, he hasn't got an *idea* of Olivia. When I mentioned her name—very carefully, you may be sure—he didn't turn a hair. He's *quite* indifferent to her."

"Well, then, is it Elsie or Rose?"

"I don't think it's anybody, but I'm not absolutely certain yet. I'll find out the next time I talk to him."

"Oh, but darling! Surely you needn't trot him out again! He's had his turn."

Freda stopped in the path to kiss him. "Jealous old angel!" she said fondly. "I'm going to do just exactly what I please, and find out all I can."

It may have been a disinclination to confess that she

had forgotten all about finding out anything, either about Olivia or anybody else, and a desire to amend the oversight, that prompted her to manœuvre for another intimate conversation with Edward Probert. But he did not respond to her overtures, though, sitting in a little group among those watching the play, he was abundantly friendly in his manner towards her, and anxious to include her in the conversation that was going on.

But Freda did not particularly shine in general conversation. Her wit was not very ready, and she seemed always to be thinking of something else. As Edward ignored the hinted invitation she conveyed to him for another walk, she took off Penelope, who had shown throughout the day a marked predilection for her society, but not without a backward look which seemed to ask how any young man could see her going off like that without springing up to accompany her. Fred was playing, and the rest sat still, and when she had departed went on with their talk and laughter with a slightly heightened air of comradeship. She was at that moment at the lowest point of her influence, and would perhaps have done better to have kept her place. But the chief reason why nobody had offered to accompany her was that there happened to be nobody in the little group who had not a personal reason for staying in it, and the general feeling with regard to her was apologetic, and not for the moment critical.

Penelope hung upon her arm with a proud air of possession. Freda was a wonder and a delight to this odd and unattractive child. She was the first per-

son who had ever treated her as an equal, as one whose ideas were as well worth getting at as anybody else's, and whose value was much in excess of what it was conceded to be by those around her. Freda had taken some pains to make herself attractive towards Elsie and Rose. She had taken none with Penelope, and yet with the elder girls there was still a good deal to be done, while Penelope accepted her without question and, it really seemed, adored her. This was gratifying, and inclined her towards the child, whom she found amusing and companionable besides.

Nevertheless, Penelope's first remark disconcerted her not a little, as tending to show that her manœuvres to secure a second *tête-à-tête* with Probert had not been so completely disguised as she had thought.

"I don't think it's much use trying to get Edward to walk about with you," said Penelope. "He's in love with Rose."

"What are you talking about?" exclaimed Freda, showing quick offence.

Penelope was not in the least put out by it. Although she had taken a strong fancy to Freda, and was ready to soften her asperities towards her, she also intended to keep the upper hand. "My dear, you did try," she said calmly. "You can't hide that sort of thing from me. I'm much too sharp. I suppose you wanted to find out from him who he is in love with. I found that out long ago."

"Well," said Freda, somewhat reassured. "I do want to find out something about what is going on—because Elsie and Rose are going to be my sisters, you see, and naturally I take an interest. As far as I'm

concerned it's no more pleasure to me to talk to Edward than to anyone else. I would much rather talk to you."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Penelope calmly. "I didn't think you wanted to talk to Edward because you liked him. Of course you don't like anybody but Fred now."

Freda was half suspicious of irony in this speech, but Penelope's next one reassured her. "All I meant was that if you want to find out what is happening you would save a lot of time and trouble by asking me."

Freda laughed. "Well, what *is* happening, you delightful imp?" she asked.

"Jack Kirby is in love with Rose. So is Edward. So is Giles. And Rose can't make up her mind which she likes best."

"Who is Jack Kirby? He isn't here, is he? I know all these by name."

"He the son of Lord Kirby, who has come to live at Prittlewell. I like him, but father doesn't."

Freda asked a lot of questions about Lord Kirby, and about Prittlewell, which Penelope answered readily enough. "I wonder Fred hasn't told you about him," she said. "It is rather exciting. Mother told me that Jack Kirby would be a lord when his father died, and if Rose marries him she will be 'my lady' like Lady Sophia."

"Did Mrs. Conway tell you that?" asked Freda, in surprise.

"Oh, no. I'm not supposed to know anything about these things. I got that out of Cooky."

"Does he seem to like Rose very much—as Fred likes me, I mean?" Freda's face was serious, and her mouth was not at its best.

"You mean is he in love with her? *You* needn't pretend that I don't know anything. I told you he was; and so are the other two."

"Why do you say that? Edward is supposed to be in love with Olivia. They all say so."

"That's because they don't take proper notice. Olivia may like him. I don't think she's in love with him, or I should have found it out. But I don't care for Olivia much, so I don't take much notice of her."

"Well, *I* don't like her much either. It's funny how you and I seem to have the same tastes, Pen dear."

"I don't know that it's so very funny. We are rather like one another, though of course I shall never be as pretty as you."

"Oh, darling! I think you'll be *very* pretty when you grow up. About Olivia—somehow I think she is designing."

"Perhaps she is. I don't know."

"Do you think she is inclined to like Fred? Of course it would be a very good match for her—the clergyman's daughter to marry the squire's son."

Penelope laughed. "Of course she likes Fred," she said. "But it's rather funny to think of her marrying him."

Freda left this point. There were immaturities in Penelope's vision, in spite of her precocious sharpness. "Edward seems to me to pay more attention to Elsie than to Rose," she said.

"I know he does. And so does Giles. That's their cunning. They are both in love with Rose."

The assured reiteration of her statement had weight with Freda, as did her implication of a masked attack. "I wonder if it's true," she said, still with her mouth rather disagreeably set. "Of course I should like Rose to marry well. I'm not sure I shouldn't choose Giles for her out of the three. I like him better than Edward."

"Why? You've hardly talked to him at all."

"I don't know why. One just feels these things. I think he would make a better husband for Rose. But of course I haven't seen Jack Kirby yet."

"You'll see him soon. They are coming down to Prittlewell at the end of the week, and he is sure to come over here as soon as ever he can."

"I wonder why Fred never mentioned him to me."

"Ah, I wonder," said Penelope, with an air of wisdom which, however, indicated no opinion that she had formed on the subject, though it appeared to do so.

CHAPTER XVI

AN INTERVIEW

Lord and Lady Kirby came down to Prittlewell on Friday evening, but without Jack, and on Saturday morning Lord Kirby rather surprisingly put in an appearance at Watermeads, and asked to see Sydney Conway.

The interview took place in Sydney's room, which he seldom used, as he preferred to spend his time in the company of whatever members of the family might be available, and the upkeep of an extra sitting-room meant extra service. It was a large well-appointed room, but suffered from the usual Watermeads air of neglect, and Lord Kirby, who lived habitually in the lap of red morocco and shining mahogany, looked round it with a critical air as he took the seat indicated to him in a shabby easy chair.

And if the Squire of Watermeads' own room bore a strong contrast to the newly and expensively furnished chamber devoted to the private pursuits of the Lord of Prittlewell, still greater was the contrast in the appearance of the two men. Lord Kirby was neatly tweeded and spatted, and what could be seen of his brown boots had all the high mellow polish associated with the best served establishments. Sydney wore his grey flannel suit, as usual, with a club tie and a pair of white tennis shoes, which had not very recently been

pipe-clayed. But he looked like a gentleman in this costume, which Lord Kirby would not have done.

"I've come over to have a little talk with you about my boy and your girl," said Lord Kirby with admirable directness.

Sydney looked down suddenly. He had expected anything but this. There was a question having to do with their adjoining properties, which he had so far only discussed with Lord Kirby's agent. If he had not had it in his mind that Lord Kirby's visit was to settle that up, he might have suspected something of his purpose, with his mind so frequently running on Jack Kirby and Rose. But the small shock was none the less unpleasant.

As Sydney did not say anything in reply to the announcement, Lord Kirby proceeded in his confident, rather patronising, but not unpleasant manner. "I want to see my boy married," he said. "He isn't very old, but I like early marriages, especially where there's a good deal concerned, as there is in his case. I want him to bring me a nice girl as a daughter-in-law, and if he brings me the right one I don't fancy she'll have much to complain of in *my* treatment of her. I've taken a very great fancy to your little Rose, Mr. Conway, and I assure you that it has given me great pleasure—very great pleasure indeed—to find that my boy has taken a great fancy to her, too. Ha! ha! Now I don't think it's such a bad thing to treat these matters in an old-fashioned way, and for the parents to agree on them before the young people fix it up for themselves. That's why I've come over to have a little chat about it."

under the spangled ceiling of night, Fred felt that he was indeed the happiest of men to have this adorable girl hanging on his arm, and the prospect of spending his life with her before him.

CHAPTER XIV

WILL SHE DO?

"WELL, my dear Jane, of course the girl is suburban and middle-class and second rate, and all that sort of thing, and I've a strong suspicion that she's a minx besides, but I think she'll do. I congratulate you."

Lady Sophia Raine was alone with Mrs. Conway. The night being as warm and still as the last, Colonel Raine was smoking with Sydney on the terrace, and the girls were with them. Fred and Freda had lost themselves in the garden, as before.

Mrs. Conway digested her friend's surprising speech; or, rather, made a preliminary effort to swallow it, but without success.

"I don't know why you say that of her," she said. "Her manners strike me as particularly good, and nobody could possibly find any fault with her appearance, or her dress. Why do you say that she is second-rate?"

"Well, she shows a disposition to address me as Lady Raine, for one thing, which is always a sign. But she'll learn all that sort of thing quickly enough, and there's nothing in it. I said she'd do, and I meant it."

"I must confess," said Mrs. Conway ponderously, "that the way she takes trouble to commend herself to me pleases me. I don't know why I should be

He had really come over because he was so excited at the idea of Jack proposing to Rose, which Jack under pressure had admitted to him was in his mind, that he wanted to talk about it. For there was nothing for him to arrange with Rose's father. He knew that she would probably come penniless, and if not he didn't care; and as for any difficulty about the match from the Conway side, it had never entered his head that they would accept it with anything but hymns and paeans of joy.

But Sydney's face did not exactly express jubilation, as he came to the end of his introductory remarks, and Lord Kirby was somewhat surprised by its expression, and inclined to wonder whether the golden offer he was so generously making had been quite understood by this odd unsuccessful man, for whom he had a feeling between contempt and pity.

He would have been still more surprised if he had had any idea of the storm of anger and resentment that had been aroused by his speech, and was raging so hotly in Sydney's mind that he was quite incapable for the moment of making any reply to it whatever. Upon the suggested marriage itself he had long since made up his mind. Much as he personally disliked young Jack, he must not allow his dislike to appear, if Rose accepted him. He could bring forward no adequate reason for refusing parental consent, and to show distaste for Rose's future husband would only have the effect of parting him still further from Rose. But he had clung, perhaps more than he knew, to the hope that Rose would not in the long run accept Jack Kirby, and here he was being asked to welcome and

encourage the marriage even before Rose had been approached. That was the chief reason for his painful disturbance of mind.

But there were others. Nobody could have been less inclined than he to found himself upon his birth. If the social position that was his by right of it had not been complicated by the rapid decay of his fortunes, he would never have given it a thought. But here was this new rich man, whose immediate forbears would scarcely have spoken to his without touching their hats, treating him as a person of such small account that he could come and talk about a marriage between their respective families as if he were conferring an honour. And worse still, he had not even shown himself alive to Rose's value, although he had spoken in praise of her. With whatever feelings in his pride of wealth he might choose to regard a man of much higher lineage than his own who had no wealth to back it, it was intolerable that he should look upon that man's daughter, who was so fair and sweet, as reduced in price. It was this consideration that stung Rose's father to speech.

His voice trembled a little as he said: "There's nobody in the world who might not think himself fortunate to marry my girl. You seem to think you can buy her."

He raised a face that startled Lord Kirby almost more than his speech. That well-dispositioned nobleman was struck with instant compunction. "Oh, my dear Mr. Conway," he protested. "What on earth have I said that makes you take it like that? I know well enough what your little girl is worth. Otherwise

I shouldn't be so dead keen for Jack to marry her as I am. She's the girl I want for him, above any other. I've proved that, I think, by coming to you. In a sort of way, you know, though not of course in the same way, there's nobody Jack couldn't marry. But I put all that aside."

"What do you put aside?" Sydney's voice was quite under control now. He was settling down to a cold anger, for which he would find food in making his antagonist declare his mind in all its native ugliness.

Lord Kirby did not blink the question. He was well used to controversy in which either side tried to dominate the other, and the weapon he habitually used was a frank statement of his own attitude, upon which his opponent was invited to concentrate himself.

"What I put aside," he said dogmatically, but not disagreeably,—"and I do it because I don't care a hang about it where the girl is so charming, and so everything that she ought to be as yours—is that if my son marries her nobody could say that it is what's called a good match for him."

"Why not; if my daughter is what you say she is?"

"You know well enough why, Mr. Conway."

"Yes, I do know why. You're a rich man, and you've—you've—you've earned a peerage——"

"Why not say 'bought a peerage,' if that's what you mean? I didn't buy it, but we'll let that pass. Well, with things as they are in the world today, the son who will inherit my riches and my peerage might be expected to marry either wealth or rank, or both. If he marries your daughter, everybody who knows

her, and whose opinion is worth having, will say he's married a treasure. But everybody who doesn't know her, and looks only at the outside, will say that he might have done better for himself. *I* don't say so, mind you, and I don't think so. I've proved it by coming over here and asking you for your daughter for a wife for my son. I've told you that the idea of such a marriage gives me great pleasure, and I mean it."

"You didn't say a word," said Sydney, still hot with resentment, "that showed you had any idea in your head but that I should jump at the chance."

Lord Kirby considered this, and laughed rather awkwardly. "I suppose you've got me there," he began, but Sydney interrupted whatever he may have been going to say further.

"You think that what you have to offer must have such weight with me—you a rich man and me a poor one—that you needn't consider the chief question at all. I can assure you, anyhow, and you may believe it or not, that your wealth and your title count for absolutely nothing with me, beside the question of what your son is in himself. And yet you've left that out of account altogether."

This was quite a new light to Lord Kirby. "Do you object to my son personally?" he asked.

"I *detest* him," Sydney rapped out.

Lord Kirby stared, out of protruding eyes filled with amazement, and had nothing to say.

"I shouldn't have said that—to you," Sydney went on, "if you hadn't worked me up to it. As it's said, we can't leave it at that. But before we come back to

it I've got something else to say. I'm a poor man. For anybody in my position I'm a *very* poor man. If that's all you had to consider you might have a right, or think you had, to come to me in the way you have. But it isn't all. I think from what I know of the world—and I've seen a good deal of it—that you quite exaggerate *your* value. No doubt there are any amount of families as good or better than mine who would welcome a marriage for a daughter with your son, because of what he could bring. But I'm quite sure that there are a great many who wouldn't. The paint's too new. For myself, I don't believe I've ever been inclined to put too high a value on these things, and if everything was right otherwise I shouldn't think twice about my being what I am and what my family has been for some generations. But I say that with you it *ought* to count, and when you come and tell me that for your son to marry my daughter would be considered a misalliance for him, I say that you've got your values wrong altogether."

Lord Kirby paid small attention to this. He thought he knew his values at least as well as this penniless squire. Money talked, all the world over, and allied with a title, however new, it talked loudly. Birth, unless it was something quite exceptional, only whispered. Still, if he had trod on the corns of a proud poor man, it had been done inadvertently. "I seem to have got wrong with you altogether," he said. "I know you come of a good old family, and I'm from one that didn't amount to anything before I made myself what I am. It *does* count with me. If your girl had come out of a country parsonage I don't

think I should have welcomed the idea as I do, though I shouldn't have made trouble about it. Yes; it *does* count with me. But being what I am you'll hardly have expected me to come to you hat in hand. Or perhaps you did. Well, I apologise for anything you object to. I don't often apologise to anybody, and when I do I mean it. Now tell me why you 'detest' my son, as you say you do."

It is always difficult in controversy to keep up the feeling that has instigated an exaggerated statement, at least to one of any impartiality of mind. Sydney's resentment had already begun to lessen when he answered: "It's more than I meant to say. I don't like the young man personally, but if he hadn't come here always with the obvious intention of amusing himself with my daughter, I shouldn't have felt anything much against him. I shouldn't have thought about him, either one way or the other."

"Well, he came here for your daughter. That seems to have put you against him, though why it should I don't know. You may put as much value as you please on your family, or your ancestors, or however you like to express it, and as little as you please on mine. But it seems to me simply ridiculous, as things go nowadays, to make that a cause of offence. I tell you this, that the bulk of the people I mix with —I'm not boasting about it, but it is so—and perhaps still more the people Jack mixes with, are at least as high up in the world as you are, and all that sort of thing isn't bothered about at all."

Sydney had an unholy gleam of joy at the thought that he had touched him. "It isn't bothered about by

me," he said. "And I know quite well that you are worth a good deal more than I am in the eyes of the world. I grant you every bit of that. But you're not so much higher that when you or one of your family want intimacy with mine you're conferring a favour on us."

"Well, I know that, and I've never thought it."

"You've never thought anything else. As for your son, naturally if he has taken a fancy to my daughter, he wants to recommend himself to the rest of her family, as far as it's worth his while. With me personally he thinks it quite enough that he is what your money has made him. I should think he'd have had a fit, if he had been told at any time that I wasn't delighted at seeing him paying attention to my daughter."

"Oh, then it's because he hasn't paid attention to you personally that you're annoyed with him."

"It isn't anything of the sort. Or rather it's a little bit of it, just as showing that he doesn't know how to behave as a gentleman. He doesn't. He's noisy and self-satisfied, and he bases himself on money and on what he can get with it. That's why I dislike him; and what he is to me he is to everybody—only with some people he finds it worth while to disguise it."

Lord Kirby allowed himself a short period of reflection, sitting with his eyes on the ground and a slight frown on his brow. Was it worth his while to go on with it, or should he show offence by taking his leave? One of the facts that decided him to stay was that he felt no particular offence. He was not

thin-skinned, and had had occasion, in the past, to shut his eyes to such views of himself as had been expressed by Sydney. It would not be difficult to do so now, especially as, coming from such a quarter, it was of little account. Even in Meadshire Lord Kirby was of more social importance than Sydney Conway, and elsewhere there was no comparison whatever. The point to decide was, whether he still wanted this marriage to take place; and when he put that question to himself, he found that he did. The poor man, hurt and angry at being looked down upon by the rich man, made an appeal to his not unkindly nature. He could forgive his bitterness and put it aside. And this particular poor man had made some impression upon that side of him that was always on the alert for social values. Sydney's bitterness may have lacked something in dignity by being expressed at all; but dignity had not been altogether absent from him. A Conway of Watermeads was probably more apart from the common herd of men in Lord Kirby's eyes than in the eyes of the Conways themselves, and, if it had not been for the poverty that was beyond customary experience in such families, Lord Kirby would never have treated his neighbour as of small account. That neighbour's value had been in a large measure restored in his mind by what had been said; and the great house in which he was sitting, finer than the one he had bought himself, and all that went with it, reminded him that, before the poverty had obtruded itself upon his notice, Watermeads and its occupants had bulked as of some importance in his eyes. As for the disagreeable and quite exaggerated criticism

of Jack, there was obviously nothing in that beyond a sense of *pique*. Jack had a more careless and familiar way with people than he had himself. That was because Jack had, in his father's eyes, been born to the wealth and station that he himself had only earned, and was 'as good as anybody.' He found Jack's manner wholly admirable, though in this case he might have made a careless young man's mistake in not paying enough attention to the vanities of a man with a standing grievance. After all, the important matter was whether Sydney was prepared to carry his resentment so far as to put obstacles in the way of the marriage. Lord Kirby believed that he would do so no more than he had believed it when he had come into the house. And if he didn't, then all the fuss he had made was about nothing.

Some such considerations as these passed very rapidly through his mind,—so rapidly that he raised his eyes and spoke before the awkwardness of a pause became apparent.

"I think you are quite wrong about my son," he said. "There isn't much shyness about him—that I'll admit; but his manners are just the same as those of other young men of the sort he's been brought up among, and he has a good heart into the bargain, which a lot of young men who are all right on the surface haven't. I know him a good deal better than you possibly can, and I say that the girl who marries him would get a prize, even if he brought her nothing but himself. I don't know whether I'm to understand you as carrying your objections to him so far as to refuse your daughter to him. If so I don't quite

see why you should have allowed him to come over here as much as he has, or let your daughter come to us."

It was now Sydney's difficult part to reduce the force of his own objections, and he felt that the price to be paid for his outbreak was a high one. It was in a tone almost approaching sulkiness that he said: "I've already told you what my own opinion of him is. I have seen him coming here and paying his attentions to Rose with the utmost distaste. I've said nothing to her, nor to anybody else, against him, in the first place because a man who tries to impose his own views upon his children in such matters as these is a fool for his pains, and in the second because I have hoped all along that if he asked her to marry him she would refuse him. I hope so still, but I shall do nothing to influence her, and if she accepts him I shall make the best of it."

Lord Kirby began to harbour a suspicion that his host was actually prepared to throw away all the advantages of a brilliant match for his daughter for the sake of satisfying a foolish prejudice of his own.

"Then, after all, you are *not* going to object to a marriage between the young people, if they can fix it up together."

The slight note of contempt, or what Sydney took to be such, was the pill he had to swallow. He swallowed it with the best grace he could. "I can't say that what I see objectionable in your son is enough to make me refuse," he said slowly. "Sometimes I've wished it was, and sometimes it very nearly has been. No, I'm not going to object, but I'm going to do noth-

ing whatever to help it on. Rose must decide for herself."

Lord Kirby had got all that he could expect to get, though for all the satisfaction he had derived from the interview he had much better not have come. "Oh, well," he said, preparing to hoist himself out of his chair and take his leave, "I'm sorry that the boy should have offended you. I believe that when you know him better, as I hope you will, you'll come to like him. He's likable enough. As you're not prepared to welcome the idea of a marriage, I suppose it's not much good discussing the business side of the arrangement. We can do that later, if the little girl accepts him. You'll find me as anxious as you that everything shall be done for her benefit that can be thought of, and, if the time comes for us to have another talk, I shan't be thinking of what has passed between us in this one. Goodbye, Mr. Conway."

He held out his hand with a direct look that contained neither offence nor cordiality. If Sydney could have met it in the same way, they would have parted with mutual respect as worthy antagonists, neither of whom had gained any advantage over the other. But the soft strain in Sydney's nature was already working. He rose from his seat, and said with a wry smile: "Well, I've said things a good deal stronger to you than I ever had any intention of saying to anybody. But I've no quarrel with you. As far as you're concerned it's quite possible to look upon your coming over here in the way you have as a compliment."

This was on the face of it such a contradiction of everything that had gone before that Lord Kirby may

be pardoned for thinking it an entire capitulation. Under that impression he behaved handsomely in replying: "Oh, well, hard words break no bones, and I shan't think twice of anything you've said that may have annoyed me at the time. Besides, some of it may have wanted saying. People like me, who have made their own way, are a little apt to ride roughshod, you know, Mr. Conway. Anyhow, you may take it for granted now that if we can bring about this marriage it will be gratifying to me in every way—in every *possible* way. There are advantages on both sides, you know. I hope, when you have thought it all over, you'll be as pleased as I am with the idea."

"I'm afraid I shall never be that," said Sydney quietly. "What I said just now I said with regard to you only. I shall be very sorry if my daughter accepts your son."

This last phrase stuck unpleasantly in Lord Kirby's mind as he thought over the interview on his homeward way. It carried more conviction with it than anything that had gone before, and it cut a good deal of ground that had seemed absolutely safe and sure from under his feet. It made it possible for him to regard Jack, almost for the first time, apart from the accident of his parentage. In the light of that accident, he was so eminently eligible that almost all doubts of his acceptance by whomsoever he proposed to had been omitted from his father's calculations. Certainly none had ever entered his head with regard to Rose, upon whom the deep satisfaction of her parents at the prospect of such a match for her, must react, even if she had no more than the mere liking

for Jack which was all that she had ever shown. But if considerations that would appeal strongly to almost every man in Sydney Conway's position really did have no weight with him, and he had set himself against the marriage in spite of them, then Jack would have his own way to make, just as if he were any ordinary young man, with nothing to recommend him but his own personality. Viewed in that light, he was by no means so certain of success as his father had anticipated. Lord Kirby had a tender regard for little Rose, and it did not fit in with his ideas of her that *she* should be affected towards marrying Jack by what he could bring her. He had only thought of her as indirectly disposed towards him by those considerations under the joyous approval of her parents. But if a cold dislike were to take the place of that approval, the influences surrounding her would be all the other way, and would be actually rather strong.

By the time he reached home, Lord Kirby was inclined to think that Sydney's opposition, even if it should remain unexpressed, was of considerably more importance than it had seemed to be. But when he came to talk it all over with his wife he was somewhat reassured.

"*You* may believe that he doesn't really want it," she said. "*I* don't believe it for a moment. But supposing it is so! What can he do? He'll have everybody else against him. What you ought to have done was not to talk to him at all, but to go to the Old Warrior. You'd had a very different reception from *her*."

CHAPTER XVII

BELLAMY

It was not at all in accordance with Sydney Conway's nature that he should keep to himself anything that was troubling him. The natural outlet of disturbance of mind was denied him. By long use he had acclimatised himself to the unsympathetic and sometimes actually hostile atmosphere that surrounded his wife. He had found a way of living with her that reduced friction to a minimum; but as it involved a treatment of her that was never quite serious, its more or less satisfactory results would have been destroyed if he had gone to her with a tale of distress. Also, she would have been quite certain to bathe his wounds in acid instead of ointment, and it was years since he had taken the risk of baring any of them to her inspection. She was, in fact, herself the cause of all the worst of them. But for the love he bore to his children, and the pleasure he took in their companionship, he would hardly have been able to support the burden of her constant proximity. If he had been a worse man he would have hated her. To love such a woman was out of the question. None of her own children were able to accomplish that feat, not even her youngest, upon whom she conferred whatever affection stirred in her absurd and self-bound nature. That was perhaps Penelope's fault, but with the others

the utmost that could be expected was some remnant of the feeling that they had had for her as little children. As she made no demands upon their love, but only upon their patience, which their equable natures enabled them to satisfy, she affected the family happiness less than she might have done. But in all essentials she had shut herself off completely from her husband and her children.

For a confidante Sydney was now accustomed to go either to Elsie or to Rose, or to both of them together. The growing up of his daughters had brought him a great increase in comfort of mind. He had loved them dearly as children, and made close friends of them, but it had been a happy revelation to him to find in them support as well as consolation. He was one of those men whose essential virility goes along with a strong feminine strain. It was natural to him to lean on others, and he had learned to lean upon his daughters, and especially upon Elsie, whose mind was more robust and direct than is common with girls of her age. In material troubles he found satisfaction in the sympathy and friendship of the Vicar, who, with even less business capacity than he had himself, was yet capable of advising him, or at least of helping him to make decisions for himself. It was perhaps curious that these three should have been his chief refuge against his own indecision and comparative weakness of character, for Fred and he were extraordinarily good friends, and he might have been expected to rely more upon his son as he grew older, and began to show a strain of efficiency, which, although not remarkable in itself, was something in excess of what

might have been expected of him. But unless the character of a son is markedly stronger than that of a father, it seldom happens that the father is prepared to relinquish the reins to the son, and a reliance upon Fred would have meant something like that in Sydney's case.

In his disturbance of mind about Rose, Sydney had often thought of taking Elsie into his confidence. Indeed, it had been hard work sometimes to refrain from possibly embittered comment to her upon the unwelcome attentions of Jack Kirby. But he had affected blindness to what was going on, partly because he was not sure that he would have Elsie's sympathy in his intense dislike to it, partly because Elsie and Rose were so much one in all things that to say anything to Elsie would be much the same as saying it to Rose. He did not know that in this matter the girls were not one but two. If he had known it, he might have drawn some comfort from the fact.

There was one person, however, who, he had reason to believe, shared his dislike for Jack Kirby. This was Bellamy, and when Lord Kirby had left him to reflections that loudly cried for utterance to another ear, he formed the characteristically sudden decision to tell Bellamy all about it.

Bellamy was painting a picture at Sandford Hole. He spent his mornings over it, and was always to be found there from an early hour, when weather conditions were suitable. Sydney went to find him immediately after breakfast on the morning following Lord Kirby's visit.

There were a few words about the picture, which

was nearing completion. The still waters of the pool, with the trees and the summer sky reflected in it, the deep-grassed flowery banks, were delightfully soothing to the spirit. Sydney understood something of the influences that had gone to form this young man's character—sage and quiet and reliable—as he stood by him, turning over in his mind the confidence he was about to make to him. His own love of nature was strong, and this was the scene of many of his happiest hours, and one of the centres round which his love for his inheritance twined itself. Bellamy seemed somehow identified with Watermeads, and all that went on there, as he slowly and patiently worked out his interpretation of this well-loved corner of it. Sydney felt an increased liking and respect for him as he threw himself on the grass by his side, and opened up his discourse.

Bellamy laid down his palette and brushes almost immediately, and gave his whole mind to what was being said to him. His face wore its customary look of gravity, but if Sydney had looked up at him he would have found it more than usually interested.

It was rather a rambling statement, which was heard to the end without comment. It made admissions that had not been made to Lord Kirby. "I can't put it altogether aside," said Sydney, "that this would be a good marriage for Rose from a worldly point of view. For one thing, she would be put quite above all the sort of trouble that she has been brought up amongst, poor girl. As far as money goes, and a place in the world, she'd have all that; and it's right that a father should consider these things. One

doesn't want to give too much weight to them, and if it means giving your daughter to a man just for the sake of them, one wouldn't do it. What I can't make up my mind about is whether—disliking this young man as heartily as I do—I'm not giving them too *little* weight. I know you don't care for him, Giles, but you can probably see him with clearer eyes than I can. Tell me what you think."

Bellamy allowed a moment to go by without speaking. Then he said, in a voice not quite like his own: "I think he's the most detestable creature of his sort I've ever met; but I can't pretend to be impartial about him any more than you can."

Sydney passed by without understanding the immense significance of the last admission. "Why, you use the very words I did," he said. "I told Kirby straight out that I detested him. But I'm bound to say that I couldn't absolutely justify myself when put to it. The personal factor was too strong. Fred and the girls like him. Nothing I dislike in him goes much below the surface. If I thought he was really a wrong 'un, I shouldn't have any hesitation. I should send him packing in double quick time. You don't think he's a wrong 'un, do you?"

Bellamy spoke again with deliberation, but without that note of repressed emotion in his voice. "I think he is inferior, through and through," he said. "I've watched him closely enough, and I've never seen anything that gives one a chance of respecting him. His good nature is the best thing about him, but it's purely selfish. He makes himself agreeable to the people he wants to be agreeable to him. He'd never take

the slightest trouble about anybody else. His manners we needn't worry about; if he wasn't what his father has made him, nobody would put up with them; as it is, they have a sort of spurious air that deceives people—some people. They seem to me just like those of a pushing counter-jumper."

Sydney laughed. He was enjoying this. "I thought you said we needn't worry about his manners," he said.

"Oh, they'll pass—in the only son of a lord."

"Well, you seem to think pretty much as I do. But you don't say any more than I do that he's a wrong 'un."

"What do you mean by a wrong 'un? He wouldn't swindle you. He'd have no temptation to; he's got too much money. I don't believe there's much else he wouldn't do to give himself pleasure."

"Have you any reason—one has to ask one's self that question and act on it—to say that he isn't a fit sort of fellow to give your daughter to? Supposing he loves her! And she loves him!"

"If she loved him,"—his voice shook a little again —"she might keep him straight, or she might not. His love for her—what's it worth? Does he love her for what's in her nature? I say he's incapable of appreciating it; there's nothing in him to meet it or draw it out. He's taken with her beauty, and when he gets tired of that, what will be left? They've nothing in common. His love's light; it isn't of the stuff that gives promise of happiness."

Sydney spoke unwillingly. "One must be fair," he said. "In the first stages, it's a girl's attractions—

her face, if you like to say so—that count. He would get to know her better. She's a girl that could make any man happy if she loved him."

"I don't believe that type of man finds his happiness in that way. He wants novelty and excitement. He might keep some sort of affection for his wife, and yet count her as nothing at all when it comes to pleasing himself."

"Do you think he is like that?"

"Yes, I do. I know the type, and I've had a pretty bitter experience."

There was a pause. Then Bellamy, who had been speaking with far more fluency and freedom of manner than Sydney had ever heard him use, broke out again. "Look here," he said, "you've admitted me into an intimacy and friendship here such as I've never known anywhere before. I want to tell you something. It's what I wouldn't say except to a friend, but it seems to me to have a bearing on what you've told me. It's about my brother. He and I were the greatest of friends. He is something like me in appearance, but he's an infinitely more attractive fellow than I am, and he could make anybody take to him if he wanted to. He married the daughter of a neighbour of ours—a girl we'd both known ever since she was a child. Well, I was in love with her myself, and I believe she might have married me if he hadn't come between us. Don't think there was anything to complain about in his doing so; only he had never shown much interest in her, and he had been away from home a great deal, and always seemed to be falling in love. He came home one autumn, and fell in love with her; she seemed to

come as a sort of revelation to him, and he *was* in love with her, mind you, and it seemed to make a different man of him. But it was only for a time. You know what happened, and it happened three years after they were married, and a year after their child was born. He was very fond of his wife, and devoted to his child. You'd have said he had everything he wanted. But he threw it all away."

He came to an abrupt end. "It's a sad story," Sydney said. "What more is there of it?"

"His wife is dead, you know. It killed her. She loved him. She didn't know he was like that. He's married the other woman since, but of course he isn't happy with her. That may come to an end at any time. I don't know what's happening. I haven't seen him since. I couldn't, after the way he treated his wife."

There was a long pause. Bellamy spoke again in a different tone. "Well, that's why I can't look upon a man who is light in his way of loving as the rest of the world might," he said. "I can't be content to leave it to chance. I wouldn't trust young Kirby—with his selfish indulgent nature, and his opportunities of gratifying it—I wouldn't trust him to make a good husband to any girl. My brother was a better man than he is, for all he made such a mess of things, but they're just alike in that respect. Anything for pleasure! I can see it as well as I can see anything, and I see it much more plainly now than I did at first."

"Well, I feel more than ever that it's a risk," said Sydney, after a long pause. "Still, it's a risk that every marriage has to run. If a man has got himself

into that kind of mess already, of course one would be quite justified in making it a reason for rejecting him—only I think that in that case one would begin earlier and stop him becoming intimate from the first. I haven't done that, and with a man as young as Kirby, you can't say for certain that he will turn out badly. You don't know enough about him."

"Well, I feel that I do."

"Yes, but my dear fellow, you can't look at the question impartially any more than I can."

"No, I can't," said Giles. "I told you so at the beginning. I'm in love with Rose myself."

He took up his palette and began to paint diligently. But there was a flush on his cheeks, and he hardly knew what colour he was putting on to the canvas.

"You're in love with *Rose!*" exclaimed Sydney.

"Yes, I am. I have been for a long time. I've tried to hide it. I thought I should never fall in love with a girl again. My first experience marked me pretty deeply; it has made a different man of me. I've felt years older than I am—until quite lately. It's some relief to tell you what has happened to me, but you needn't be afraid of my upsetting things. I'm used to keeping my feelings to myself."

"But, my dear fellow! To tell you the truth I've had some idea that you—you might be coming to like Elsie in that way; you've been a good deal with her, and—oh, well, the idea just occurred to me."

Bellamy laughed. "Elsie can't have thought that," he said. "We've been great friends. I dared not trust myself to be too much with Rose. I'm not sure

that Elsie hasn't an inkling of the truth. But there won't be any complications there."

"Oh, I didn't mean that. What I was going to say was that the idea was pleasing to me. If it's Rose, it will be just as pleasing—in fact, a great deal more so, because it would remove the other unpleasantness."

"It's very good of you to say that. There aren't many men who would rather I married their daughter than that Kirby's son did."

"I should think most men would, if they loved their daughters. Only the snobs would prefer young Kirby."

"Well, then, there are a good many snobs in the world. I've got very little money, you know, and shall never have much. That brother of mine was a spendthrift, amongst his other qualities, and we're not rich, though my father has a good property."

"Like to like then, except that I've got practically no money at all. My girls won't have a penny."

Bellamy looked at him with a smile. "Do you really mean that you would welcome me as Rose's husband?" he asked. "She might marry anybody, as they put it. She has already attracted to herself what Lady Sophia calls the prize of the County."

"Oh, Sophia! She thinks of nothing but that sort of thing. Anyway, young Kirby isn't as big an egg as that, however you like to look at him. I should be sorry for the poor old County if he were. Could you give Rose a comfortable home, Giles?"

"I might raise about six hundred a year, apart from what I can make. That's beginning to count for something, and may increase considerably—prob-

ably will, I should say. But I don't suppose I shall ever touch the two thousand mark, with everything included. I've nothing much to offer a girl like Rose."

"You've got more to offer her than she has ever had, poor girl. It's good enough for me, Giles, and you may be sure that *she* won't look at that side of it. I wish you'd go in and win, and remove that Kirby incubus from us."

Bellamy took up his brushes again. "I'll think about it," he said, almost indifferently.

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. BLUMENTHAL

IT was not so curious, considering her remarkable oddities of character, that Mrs. Conway should have invited Mr. Blumenthal to a *tête-à-tête* luncheon with her at Watermeads, as that that gentleman should have accepted the invitation. For Watermeads, as has been said, was a three hours' railway journey from London, with a two and a half mile drive tacked on to the end of it, and Mrs. Conway had uncompromisingly announced that she could not send anything to meet him, but that there would probably be a fly at the station.

Mr. Blumenthal found a fly and drove up in it, shortly before one o'clock. He wore a frock coat, a silk hat, and patent leather boots, and carried a neatly rolled umbrella with a gold top, though the brazen August sky showed no sign of rain. He was received at the door by Alice, in a clean cap and apron, and shown through the great hall, upon which he threw appreciative glances, into the parlour, which was cool and inviting after the glare outside. So far there had been little to indicate the extreme poverty that brooded over Watermeads, and Mr. Blumenthal had been told nothing about that poverty. Fred had not sought to hide it from him. Mr. Blumenthal had known that he was working with his cousin's firm,

which was a sound and reputable one, and was about to leave it for the still brighter promise of his uncle's patronage. The name of the Right Honourable Mark Drake was one to conjure with in the political party with which Mr. Blumenthal, upon taking out his papers of naturalisation, had identified himself. And it meant money besides; Mr. Blumenthal happened to know that.

But although the excessive poverty of Watermeads had been concealed from Mr. Blumenthal, wittingly by his daughter, unconsciously by Fred, he had none the less received a series of slight shocks, which had somewhat aroused his keen critical faculty. The necessity for the station fly was one of them. If not a motor-car, a carriage and pair ought to have been expected from such a house. The hurdles at the west gate, which the flyman had had to get down to put aside, provided the second. The opening of the door by a maid of the appearance associated in Mr. Blumenthal's mind with respectable seaside lodgings, instead of by a butler or a footman or both, as his own door would have been opened, was the strongest. But the imposing appearance of the house, the size of the great hall, and the handsome staircase, had tended to modify the effect of these disappointments, and Mr. Blumenthal was merely a little puzzled, as he was left to himself in the cool parlour, to reduce the moisture on his face by hasty dabbings of his handkerchief, and to wonder for the hundredth time what Mrs. Conway's summons portended.

She had written quite politely, but rather in the manner of one issuing a command, asking him for a

private interview on a matter of importance. The rest of the family—and their guests—would be out for the day. Would he kindly come by such and such a train and leave by such and such another? They would have plenty of time for their talk, and she should be pleased to give him luncheon. Would he oblige her by not mentioning her request to his daughter, until after she had seen him?

The summons, remarkable enough, had not particularly struck him as so. He was a kow-tower by nature, and had formed an exaggerated opinion of the importance of the people to whom his daughter was about to ally herself,—an opinion which Mrs. Conway's half gracious half peremptory letter had not lessened. He knew very little of English life, outside his City and suburban circles, though he thought he knew a good deal. He wanted to get on socially, and had formed the idea that the Conways could help him. He was thus in an encouraging condition to receive Mrs. Conway's proposal of a bargain to be struck, with his money on the one side and her family's status on the other, provided only that she could find the right way of recommending it to him. But he was quite unprepared to discover that the striking of such a bargain was the purpose of her summons. All sorts of conjectures had passed through his mind, from that as to whether he was to be examined as to his own personal fitness for the alliance about to be contracted—this accounted for the elaborate costume—to an uneasy suspicion that some of his dealings in the City might have come to those exalted ears, and furnished matter for comment,

though anything in that way was of course capable of satisfactory explanation. The nearest he had got to the truth was a possible discussion as to what he was prepared to 'put down' for Freda, and in his slight nervousness he had considerably increased this amount, so that it could only be regarded as extremely handsome.

Waiting in the parlour, however, for Mrs. Conway's appearance, he was inclined to reconsider this question, or at least to leave it in abeyance till he should see which way the wind blew. The parlour, charming as it was in its placid homeliness, was not the sort of room likely to impress Mr. Blumenthal, whose tastes ran to gilt and plush, and the more of them the better. He did, however, know a great deal about the value of pictures, and there were one or two hanging on the walls which inclined the wavering balance of his opinion about Watermeads once more to approval. He was busy examining one of them when Mrs. Conway came in.

She was one of those women whose taste in dress runs to all sorts of odd little pieces of silk and lace and 'trimmings,' tacked on according to a possibly well thought out scheme, but creating the effect of ornament rather overdone. No amount of ornament, however, could ever strike Mr. Blumenthal as too profuse, and Mrs. Conway appeared to him to be a very well-dressed woman, as well as a majestic one.

She did not shake hands with him, but bowed in a stately and gracious fashion as she motioned him to a seat. "I thought we might have our little talk be-

fore luncheon," she said, "unless you are very hungry, Mr. Blumenthal."

Mr. Blumenthal *was* hungry after his journey, and it was already half past one, at which time his habit was to have finished a meal more substantial than would agree with most men of middle-age who do not go in for corrective exercise. But he politely disclaimed hunger, and took the chair indicated to him with a smile of almost servile amiability.

He was a stout man of about fifty, with a florid complexion and little dark moustache. His features were not markedly Semitic, but were enough so, taken with his name, to have given rise to the impression that he was at least of Jewish origin. This, however, he had always disclaimed, and was prepared to do so now, forcibly, if it was that that was wanted to be discovered about him.

Mrs. Conway made no apology for the possible inconvenience she had put him to. "When one has something to discuss in private," she said, "it is better to have a personal interview. That was why I asked you to be good enough to come and see me at a time when I happened to be alone. I am sorry that you should have missed meeting my husband, but I *quite* hope that in the future you will have other opportunities. At present we are unable to ask a great number of people to stay with us, but naturally, if your daughter marries my son, we shall hope to have the pleasure of seeing both you and Mrs. Blumenthal here."

It had not before occurred to her to hold out any such promise, but she had been regarding Mr. Blumenthal during the progress of her speech, and was

rather inclined to approve of him. The total unsuitability of his attire for the purposes of his day had not struck her, as it would have struck most people accustomed to seeing men dressed in country clothes. Her observant capacities did not run on those lines. Mr. Blumenthal was a rich City man, and looked it. His ingratiating manner also pleased her, as indicating a readiness to fall in with the views she was about to express to him.

Mr. Blumenthal was delighted with her address. He saw himself and his wife staying as guests in a large country house, meeting all sorts of big 'County' wigs—he had all the names of the important residents of this part of Meadshire at his fingers' ends—and talking about it afterwards. "I, too, am sorry not to see Mr. Gonway," he said, "but it is a great bleasure to make your acquaintance, Madam, and to hear that my little Freda has had such a kind welcome."

"We are very pleased with Freda," said Mrs. Conway graciously. "She has earned the commendation of all. Her manner towards myself is that of a daughter towards a mother, which is exactly what it ought to be, and naturally inclines me towards her." Here she took a new breath. "Naturally, Mr. Blumenthal, a mother's chief thought in such matters as these is for her children's happiness. If Freda had been the daughter of one of our neighbours around here, or of the large number of friends we have outside amongst people in a position like ourselves, we should have welcomed this proposed marriage warmly. She is a *sweet* girl—I say it advisedly—and my own opinion is that Fred is assured of happiness

with her. I should not have cared for a moment about anything that she might have brought with her; such a thought would not have entered my head for a moment; it would have been utterly repugnant to me to consider such a thing."

Mr. Blumenthal admired the easy flow of her discourse, and the play that she made with her shapely hands. But his business habits of going directly to a point, and his growing hunger, compelled him to cut it short at this point. "Oh, yes, I quite understand, Madam," he said. "Your marriages have been made with people of your own sort, as you say, and my Freda is not of your own sort. But she is a lady, and very bretty, and I have spent, oh, colossal sums of money in giving her every advantage, and the result is, Mrs. Gonway, that you are delighted with her, and I am delighted, too, that you are delighted. But that is not all. Freda is my only child, and I am what you call a warm man. By and by I shall be a millionaire. There is no doubt about that; I am not far off it already, and I should like you to know it. Freda will have my money after I am dead, and I intend to provide her with a handsome dowry on her marriage. How much I am not quite prepared to say, but it will be a handsome dowry. It is what you call *quid pro quo*, isn't it? Freda will have what your young Fred can give her, and he will have what *I* can give her. What you call gomfortable all round, eh?"

If Mrs. Conway had then and there demanded the amount of Freda's dowry, Mr. Blumenthal would have announced a sum rather less than he was prepared to go to, but much in excess of what would have pro-

vided for all that she had intended to bargain for. But she wanted to talk 'about it and about,' and did not use her opportunity.

"That is quite satisfactory as far as it goes, Mr. Blumenthal," she said. "I will not deny that, things being what they are, the money side of the question *is* a consideration. I should not be doing my duty by myself or my family if I did not admit it. Now, I don't know whether you are aware that the Conways have lived here at Watermeads for nearly three hundred years. They have always lived in the past in considerable style, as became their position and the size of their property. You have seen the outside of this house, and you can judge for yourself what it implies in the expenditure of its owners. In the past, Mr. Blumenthal, the Conways would have had no need to welcome a marriage for the eldest son of their house that simply brought in money. They would have scorned to consider it."

Mr. Blumenthal was beginning to wonder exactly how much need there was of overcoming their scorn in the present. The size of the house had certainly impressed him, but so had the station fly, and the hurdles, and Alice in her cap and apron. He kept wary silence for more to follow, with an agreeable anticipation of lunch in the background of his mind.

Mrs. Conway pursued her course, with intense appreciation of her own powers of speech and clarity of exposition. "That," she said, "has unfortunately come to an end. Landed property is not what it was —not by *any* means—and although the Conways are as old a family—almost—as you will find anywhere,

and still live in the fine house which you have seen for yourself, anything like the former state that was kept up at Watermeads has unfortunately become impossible. That things might not be better than they actually are I do not say. Mistakes have been made—it is not for me to say by whom or to impute blame to anybody; I have always been ready with my advice, and it has not always been taken. If it had been—— However, that is not the point."

It was so very much not any kind of point that should have been hinted at to Mr. Blumenthal that that gentleman can hardly be blamed for wondering if something rather serious was not at the back of it. He knew that men of good birth are not immune from temptations to financial irregularity, and he did not want to be mixed up with any shady gentlemen of quality who would sponge on him, and perhaps involve his name in unpleasant rumour.

"Has Mr. Gonway been unfortunate in speculation?" he enquired with a directness that demanded an answer.

Mrs. Conway bethought herself. "I will not deny," she said, "that at one period there was a gold mine, which absorbed some thousands of pounds that could more usefully have been employed otherwise. I was entirely against the investment, but it held out such hopes of a rich return that I allowed myself to be overruled. Not one penny has ever come back from it. There was a question of someone or something turning out refractory, which I do not pretend to understand, but the result was as I had anticipated."

"Never touch a gold mine," said Mr. Blumenthal,

with conviction. "What else has Mr. Gonway dropped his money over?"

Mrs. Conway did not notice his change of tone, which was that of a man seeking for information and meaning to have it. She was always ready to impart information, especially to a new audience, and Mr. Blumenthal appeared to her to be a highly satisfactory one, owing to the interest he showed in what she was telling him.

"I am not aware of any other investments of that nature," she said. "When it turned out badly I took a strong stand, and said, much as you have, Mr. Blumenthal: '*No more gold mines!*' In fact, no more mines of any sort, or indeed anything that absorbs money, which is badly wanted for other purposes, and does not return it. I am happy to say that in that respect my advice has been followed, though how far that would have been the case if there had been further sums of money that could have been treated in that way I do not know."

"Then that was the end of money that could be invested," suggested Mr. Blumenthal.

"That particular sum of money came out of the proceeds of an important family portrait. It was by Sir Joshua Reynolds, whom you may have heard of, Mr. Blumenthal. It was of the Lady Penelope Conway, an ancestress of my husband's."

"I have seen the bicture in New York," said Mr. Blumenthal. "It was sold for seventeen thousand pounds."

"Unfortunately, we received nothing like that price for it," said Mrs. Conway. "But what we did receive,

if part of it had not been invested in the way I have told you of, would have set us right for a good many years. As it was, other family treasures have had to go, and I sometimes think that by and by we shall have nothing left at all."

"You have been obliged to sell other bictures?" enquired Mr. Blumenthal.

She told him what had had to be sold, and the prices that some of the treasures had fetched; also the various purposes to which the money had been applied. It was satisfactory to pour out her troubles into the ears of so sympathetic a listener. "Of course we must educate our sons for the positions we hope they will fill by and by," she said, "and in the way that the sons of the family have always been educated. I am far from grudging money for that. And we must keep a roof over our heads, and provide ourselves with food. I do all that I can to cut down expenses to the utmost limit, but sometimes my task appears to me to be almost hopeless. Ah, there is the luncheon bell. I am sure you must be hungry after your journey; we can finish our talk afterwards. I will ring for the maid to take you up to my husband's dressing-room, where you will find hot water and a clean towel. I have no doubt that you would like to wash your hands."

When Mrs. Conway and Mr. Blumenthal met again in the dining-room, the atmosphere had somewhat changed. Mrs. Conway had been asking herself whither the conversation she had so much enjoyed was leading, and been forced to the unpleasant conclusion that she had let her tongue run away with her.

She did not put it to herself quite like that, but was obliged to acknowledge that her usual habit of saddling anybody but herself with responsibility for the family misfortunes must have given Mr. Blumenthal a far deeper insight into those misfortunes than at all suited her purpose. She spent rather a disagreeable five minutes with her own thoughts until he rejoined her, but made up her mind that the mistake she had made was not past mending; and might even, if properly handled, lead to good results.

As for Mr. Blumenthal, he followed the maid up to Sydney's dressing-room with the uneasy feeling that, in the expressive parlance of his business circle, he had been 'sold a pup,' and with the firm intention of examining the bargain a good deal more exhaustively before he closed with it. Why, if what this imposing lady had been telling him was true, which there was no reason to doubt, the family must be on the very verge of bankruptcy. By her own showing they had been living for years on the sale of their valuables, and people did not do that, in Mr. Blumenthal's experience, until every other source of income was at an end. The estate was sure to be mortgaged up to the hilt, and might be foreclosed upon at any moment. And if that happened, what became of the Conway social value? Mr. Blumenthal's ideas upon such matters were not altogether in accordance with facts, but it was quite clear to him that a County family divorced from its estates, and not possessing a title, had less to depend upon than a City family that might come to possess both. No; unless everything was thoroughly examined, and found capable of being put

on a satisfactory business footing, Freda should be summoned home forthwith. There were other fish in the sea, amongst which she might disport herself. Mr. Blumenthal was not going to pour golden money into these waters.

His mood of suspicion was not lessened by the room in which he was shown to wash his hands. If it reflected its owner's tastes, as it did, it reflected none that were likely to find favour with Mr. Blumenthal. It was a large square room, like most of the rooms at Watermeads, facing south. Sydney liked plenty of air and plenty of light, and had long since banished both curtains and blinds from the windows. The carpet had disappeared at about the same time. It had worn into holes, and Sydney had said that he preferred bare boards. He also liked plenty of floor space, so the large four-post bed had been removed at the time of his marriage, and a small iron one had since been put into a corner of the room. The other furniture was old and solid, but hardly corrected the impression made by the large bareness and the small iron bed. The paper on the walls was faded and stained, the paint of the woodwork had peeled and cracked in the sun, the ceiling had fallen in one corner, but not extensively enough to demand the reparation of the whole, and the lathes had been left showing.

Sydney's toilet accessories were of the simplest. Mr. Blumenthal brushed his sleek black hair with a wooden-backed brush that had cost a few shillings when all its bristles had been intact, which now they were not, and looked with surprise at other toilet

articles which formed a marked contrast to the heavy silver that crowded his own dressing-table at home. A threadbare dressing-gown hung from a hook on one of the doors; an apparatus for the exercise of muscles was fixed to the other.

There were many pictures on the walls, but none of them were of any value. Mr. Blumenthal derived some comfort from the names attached to some of the old photographic groups, of which there was a large number, but the comfort was small. The Conway connections and status in the past were beyond doubt. The trying question was, what were they worth in the present?

CHAPTER XIX

AN OFFER

Mrs. Conway had ordered quite a nice little lunch for herself and Mr. Blumenthal. With late dinners once more the order of the day, it was possible to make up tasty little dishes to replace the joints and puddings of the usual mid-day meal. There was a vegetable soup, a dish of stuffed eggs, and another of *kromeskis*. The sweet was a gooseberry fool, and there were little biscuits and squares of cheese to finish up with. There was a choice of beverages between ginger ale and cold water, and a small cup of coffee was provided afterwards.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Conway forgot to invite Mr. Blumenthal to smoke when it came to this stage. Under the soothing influence of one of the expensive cigars that he carried in his pocket, he might have forgotten the various voids that his meal had done little to fill. But he did not like to ask for permission, and sat with a savage feeling of baulked desire always increasing upon him, while his hostess held forth upon a variety of subjects, none of which had any bearing upon what was in both their minds.

Mr. Blumenthal was very near to ' jucking the whole goncern,' ordering his fly round forthwith, and driving back to the station hotel at Sailsby for a satisfactory meal before taking the train back to Lon-

don. But he wanted to see more of Watermeads, and especially the pictures, and controlled himself sufficiently to ask politely if he might be shown them.

Mrs. Conway graciously conceded the request. There was yet an hour and a half before Mr. Blumenthal need leave to catch his train. When they had gone over the house, perhaps they might finish their talk on the terrace behind it. It was cool and shady, and it would be pleasant to be out of doors.

Mr. Blumenthal made up his mind that he would smoke when they were out of doors, with or without permission, and lost something of his acute irritation and discomfort of body as he made the decision. He was interested in the pictures, and especially in the reputed Holbein, about which he asked a great many questions as he stood before it. "Oh, a Holbein, no!" he said, throwing out his hands when he had closely examined it; "but it is a beautiful bigture. If Mr. Gonway would like to sell it, I will give him five hundred pounds for it and take my chance. But I should not try to sell it again. I should geep it."

"I don't think it is in the least likely that my husband would sell it," said Mrs. Conway, with *hauteur*. "It is a family portrait, and in spite of what has been said is almost certainly by Holbein."

"By Holbein, no," said Mr. Blumenthal again. "By some one of his school probably yes. But it is a beautiful bigture, and I will give Mr. Gonway a thousand pounds for it. It is zertainly not worth anything like that, but when I like a bigture I do not mind what I give for it."

He produced one or two instances of his picture-

buying feats, to which Mrs. Conway listened with cold politeness. The very mention of money seemed to be abhorrent to her, and the impression she created, or would have created but for the talk before luncheon, was that it was quite out of the question that anything whatever should be sold out of Watermeads, and that it was indelicate to suggest it. She promised, however, as Mr. Blumenthal pressed the point, to mention his offer to her husband, and there the matter was left.

Mr. Blumenthal's sharp black eyes were used to their utmost capacity as they went over the various show rooms of the house, but he made no remarks upon the state of them, and by the time they were settled on the garden terrace, Mrs. Conway had recovered the greater part of her assurance of mind, and was prepared to come to the point at once and finish it all off before Mr. Blumenthal had recovered from the impression created by his tour of inspection.

She cleared her throat preparatory to beginning her speech, but Mr. Blumenthal, who was feeling rather better, with a fragrant cigar between his teeth, frustrated her. "Well, Mrs. Gonway," he said, in a slightly more familiar manner than he had hitherto used, "I am glad you have given me the obbortunity of seeing something of how it is here. Without going into questions more fully than is possible just at present, I would not led my Freda marry your Fred as it is now brobosed. Bot I think we might bossibly come to an amigable understanding. What I would do would be to dake over the broberty as it stands, with the house and all its gontents, and do it up for the

young beoble to live in it. I would also brovide them with a suitable income. That is my offer, subjegt to examination by lawyers as to amount of liability to be gleared off the estate, about which I know nothing."

Mrs. Conway had not quite taken it all in, but it sounded very much like what she had been intending to propose herself—with one small exception of detail. "I don't think," she said graciously, "that it would be the best arrangement that could be made for the young people to live here in this house with us, though of course after my husband's death they will come here as a matter of course. There is a very charming house——"

"Oh, I was not brobosing that they should live here with you, Mrs. Gonway," Mr. Blumenthal interrupted her. "That would never do. You have made it quite clear to me that you cannot go on living here much longer in any gase. What I therefore suggest is that you should give up the house at once to your eldest son, who as you say will have it as a madder of course by and by. You will be relieved of an ingubus and a whide elevant, and the young gouble will be handsomely brovided for, and will be able to cut a dash in the style of old times that you have told me about."

Mrs. Conway was collecting her faculties for offended speech, but Mr. Blumenthal gulped down the remainder of his coffee and rose from his seat. "Well, that is my offer," he said, holding out his hand, "if you will be good enough to talk it over with your husband and ask him to write to me. Now I will drive back to the station. I can find the fly for myself.

Goodbye, Mrs. Gonway, and thank you for a very pleasant meeting."

He had shaken hands and taken himself off with a quick step, before Mrs. Conway had time to open her mouth. She opened it, nevertheless, when she was left alone, and sat where she was for some time before she bethought herself to close it. When she had closed it she still continued to sit where she was until Parker, Freda's maid, came out to her with her head held high and a supercilious look upon her face that Mrs. Conway found it hard to put up with. "Mr. Blumenthal asked me to remind you, ma'am," she said, "of the message he sent to Mr. Conway about a picture he wishes to buy."

Then Parker went indoors again, still carrying her head and her nose high. And Mrs. Conway sat on where she was.

It is doubtful whether the good lady had ever found herself in such difficulties as to the best way in which to carry on a discussion with her husband as when the picnic party returned home, and she had to give an account of her late interview. It did not at first transpire that she had invited Mr. Blumenthal to it. He seemed to have dropped in to luncheon in a casual sort of way, and then behaved in a most 'unaccountable' manner. But a very few questions put Sydney in possession of the facts of the case, and he showed such dismay that Mrs. Conway was driven to defence of her action almost immediately. As, for once in a way she had been forced to admit to herself that she had made a mistake, if not a series of them, she was not so much at her ease as usual in her impartial ap-

portionment of blame all round, but would probably have argued herself into her customary attitude of frustrated righteousness if she had met with enough opposition.

But Sydney said quietly: "I think we had better have Fred in and tell him about this. It's rather serious, mother." He went out of the room at once, and for the first time in her life Mrs. Conway found herself in some disquietude at the prospect of a discussion with one of her children.

Fred fortunately found some humour in the contemplation of Mr. Blumenthal under the conditions revealed to him, which eased the awkwardness, though in the main he was inclined to take the matter more seriously than his father.

"I could have told you, if you'd asked me," he said, "that he was a difficult customer, mother. He's a jolly obstinate one, too. If he's got it into his head that Freda isn't doing as well for herself as he wants her to, he won't make any bones about bringing our engagement to an end."

"That, I should think, would be a matter for Freda herself," said Mrs. Conway. "If Freda is the girl I have always taken her to be, and I have no reason to suppose she is not, in spite of the unaccountable way in which her father has behaved, she will not allow him to bring the engagement to an end."

"She isn't of age yet," said Fred. "Besides, although I'm not marrying her for her money, it would hardly be fair on her to cut her off from it. *I* can't give her what she ought to have in that way; I wish I could. I can't marry her on the four hundred a

year Uncle Mark is going to give me, and I don't know when I shall have any more. It would mean asking her to wait indefinitely."

"The man is quite right," said Sydney, "in saying that we can't afford to live at Watermeads much longer. When you get another point of view like that, it brings things home to you. I'm not sure that it wouldn't be the best thing to accept his offer, and make the change now, once for all."

"Pray do not talk in that absurd way, Sydney," said Mrs. Conway. "I may have made a mistake in trying to discuss affairs with such a man—pray how could I know what he would turn out to be?—but there is no necessity to show offence with me by talking nonsense at me."

"He probably thinks," said Sydney, "that Watermeads is heavily mortgaged. I suppose most people would have raised mortgages before they began to make the economies that we have been making for years past. I haven't done it because I've always recognised that if things didn't go better, and we had to sell the place, we should have to have something to live on. I'm afraid you must have given him the idea that things are worse than they really are, mother. However, it's no use talking of that now. The mischief's done, and we had better make up our minds how we are going to mend it."

"Certainly not by forsaking our home just when affairs seem to have taken a turn for the better," said Mrs. Conway; "and as for the mischief that you say has been done, Sydney, I should wish to remind you that you have not heard all that passed between Mr.

Blumenthal and myself. If you had you would not be so ready with your blame for my having made an effort—abortive, it is unfortunately true, but still an effort—to put matters on a satisfactory basis for all concerned. However, that is not the point. I am quite sure that Fred would be the very last one to wish that himself and his wife should take the place of his father and mother."

"No, I shouldn't like that at all," said Fred quickly, "and I don't think Freda would like it either."

"My dear boy," said his father kindly, "I know very well how you'd be likely to feel about it. But I think some arrangement might be come to with Blumenthal that would not make it seem odd that you should come and live here. After all, lots of people in our position have to let their houses because they can't afford to live in them. We ought to have let Watermeads long ago, before it got too dilapidated for anybody to take. What we might arrange would be simply to let it to Fred, whom we would rather have here than anybody. The rent would be low, because a lot of money would have to be spent on putting it into order, but we should get rid of the burden of it, and should be much more comfortable in a smaller house. The property still brings in something—in fact, enough for us to live on, better than we live now."

"I think," said Mrs. Conway, "that the whole suggestion is preposterous; and if you had heard the way in which it was made——"

"It doesn't much matter how it was made, mother," said Sydney. "Mr. Blumenthal is a business man and probably made his business proposition in his usual

way. It isn't a bad one, you know—for us, and we ought to be able to come to terms with him when he hears that there's no mortgage on the house, and very little on the land. What I should like to do would be to take over the Manor Farm. It would be a delightful house to live in if we could raise some money to make a few alterations."

"What I was prepared to suggest to Mr. Blumenthal," said Mrs. Conway, "was that Fred and Freda should live at the Manor Farm, which Mr. Blumenthal should do up for them, and that money should be provided to put the estate upon a paying basis."

Sydney stared at her, and then laughed rather ruefully. "Really, mother!" he said. "I know you always act for the best, but don't you think that I might have been consulted before these negotiations were entered into? Well, I won't ask for an answer to the question. I'm sure that you won't act in that way again, and that's all that really matters now. I think I will get into communication with Mr. Blumenthal, as he suggests. I'm not sure you haven't done as well for us as if you had had your own way. I'm tired of the struggle. It will be a happy day for me when Fred can take it on with a better chance of success than I have ever had. Dear old boy, I shall take just as much pleasure in the revival of Watermeads for you, as I should for myself. And if we can manage it we shall be living next door, so to speak, and shall share in all the fun that seeing the place lift up its head again will bring. So I say, Hurrah for Fred and Freda at Watermeads, and the rest of us living happily at Manor Farm."

"As usual, Sydney," said Mrs. Conway, "you are ready to let a new idea run away with you. No doubt it would provide you with amusement for the time being to make a complete change, but——"

"If I could raise a thousand pounds," said Sydney, "I would make such a house of Manor Farm as anybody in the world would be pleased to live in. It would be much more than big enough for us, and with the income we should have we should be able to live like other people and see our friends. Oh, the relief of having the burden removed, and being able to enjoy life without that shadow always in the background on one's mind! It has been just as heavy on you as on me, mother. You've borne your part. You'd be more yourself living in a charming house like that with everything nice about you than struggling on in a corner of this one. Let's make up our minds to it, I say. Nothing else would be altered. We should be what we've always been here, only more able to play the part we used to play in the old days."

"I don't know what on earth Freda and I should do with a house like Watermeads," said Fred. "I'd much rather live at Manor Farm myself, and have you here, Dad, if we could bring Blumenthal to see it."

"And pray is not that precisely what I ventured to suggest myself?" enquired Mrs. Conway,—"and was treated with scorn for the suggestion."

"Blumenthal wouldn't see it," said Sydney. "Why should he? I wouldn't take it from him either. Why should I? I don't want him to do anything for me; whatever he likes to do for his daughter—that's another thing. If what he does happens to suit me,

so much the better. And this does suit me, better than anything I could have imagined. We could make a glorious thing of the garden at Manor Farm. I'd almost rather work at that than at this garden; it's more compassable. As for furnishing, I should bargain that we took what we wanted from here. It would hardly be missed, and we shouldn't take the very best things. If it comes to be arranged I should want to give it a proper start. The house wants a good deal of adapting. I wonder if there is anything we could sell that we don't particularly want—the very last sale of anything out of Watermeads it would be."

Mrs. Conway had been thinking. A phrase of her husband's had struck her. If they left Watermeads for Manor Farm they would still be the same as they had always been. That was so, of course. And she understood that it was not proposed to part with the property, but only to let the house, as it were. Freda was amenable, and obviously devoted to herself. She would not want to arrogate to herself a position that rightly belonged to her mother-in-law, even if she did live in the great house. In fact, it would be natural that she should lean on her for advice and support, in a situation in which she would not at first find herself at ease. Mrs. Conway saw herself almost as much at the head of affairs at Watermeads, with Freda nominal mistress there, as she was now, and under conditions that would give more scope for her genius than she had hitherto enjoyed.

"For myself," she said, "there would be nothing derogatory in leaving Watermeads itself for a house that was at one time the Dower House. Under cer-

tain circumstances, which it would be painful to name, it would be the natural place for me to live in. If I had only myself to think of, I think I should prefer it; it is simply because I do not think only of myself that I should wish the idea more closely examined before it is seized hold of as if it were the one thing that we had always desired to complete our happiness. That is the mistake that is always being made. An idea is new; therefore that idea is delightful. Novelty, novelty, novelty. I sometimes think——"

"There's a lot in what you say, mother," said Sydney with a laugh. "One *does* welcome change, especially when almost any change one could have would be for the better. But in this case there's no doubt about it being for the better. We shall be able to live within our income and enjoy life. That puts it in a nutshell. All the anxieties will be swept away, and that's enough to make one sing for joy."

"You talked just now about selling something to provide money for alterations at Manor Farm," said Mrs. Conway. "I am absolutely against these sales, as I have often said. Beautiful things disappear, and in the long run the money for which they are sold disappears too. But if it is absolutely necessary that another picture should be sold—I should stipulate that it should be the last—Mr. Blumenthal has taken a fancy to the Holbein, and offers to buy it for a thousand pounds."

By the end of the day Mrs. Conway had more than recovered her equanimity. She had been derided, she had been blamed. What she had done with the sole purpose of helping others, while obliterating all con-

siderations of self, had been treated as if she, of all people, were least capable of devising a workable scheme, and carrying it through. And yet, look at the result! Her husband had been all the evening more light-hearted and younger in appearance and manner, than she had seen him for a long time. Her son was to be put into a position which, but for her, he would not have filled for years to come. Her other children were delighted with the changes that were coming. She breathed heavily, as she thought it all over. For herself, of course, it was the end of all things. Her husband, with his light careless nature, might take pleasure in his new toy, and forget all that his renunciation meant; for her that was impossible. Well, she must go on to the end, strong but belittled. Some day, perhaps, her worth would be known.

CHAPTER XX

FRED IS DISTURBED

Lady Kirby had invited all the young people of the immediate neighbourhood to dine and dance at Prittlewell House. She had given only three days' notice, but there were few refusals, and the company she managed to collect stretched the capacity of her dining-room to the utmost, and gave her ball-room the effect of being well-filled, while yet leaving comfortable room for everybody to dance.

Jack Kirby arrived at Prittlewell from Cowes, just an hour before dinner-time. He had asked for this party, and it had been a matter of discussion between his father and mother whether the request had not betokened some serious intention on his part. Had he made up his mind to propose, or was it to be a sort of last look round amongst the pretty girls who would be gathered together, so that he might judge whether Rose still shone above the rest, and so make up his mind to take the plunge? Lady Kirby inclined to the latter view, Lord Kirby to the former, because of what Jack had already said to him. But on cross-examination this had turned out to be less definite than he had led his wife to suppose. Jack had spoken in high praise of Rose's beauty. His father had told him that nothing would please him better than for Jack to marry Rose. Jack had said that he had a damn good

mind to do so, and it was on this foundation that Lord Kirby had built the hopes which had impelled him to talk it over with Sydney Conway.

The party from Watermeads drove over to Prittlewell in the ramshackle old landau hired from the Conway Arms. The three girls and Olivia were inside, and Fred on the box. The almost continuous fine weather of the past three months had broken at last, and the night was cold and damp. Otherwise the carriage could have been left open, and Fred could have talked to the girls. As it was, he was reduced to a duologue with the driver, or to the solace of his own thoughts. The driver had a vein of taciturnity, but he liked Fred, as did most people around Watermeads, and would have been willing to talk to him during the five mile drive, if Fred had produced his usual amiable loquacity. But Fred preferred his own thoughts, and sat silent for the better part of the drive.

His thoughts, however, were not so happily serene as might have been expected from the newness of his engagement and the hours of pleasure he was about to enjoy in the company of his beloved. In the first place he had had a little tiff with Freda, which, although it had been brought to a close with capitulation on her part, and a kiss to follow, still disturbed him. Freda had first of all objected to driving five miles in a slow hired fly. Why couldn't they get a motor from somewhere? She was sure her father would pay. Fred had refused this vicarious offer, with some dignity, and she had given in with a shrug of the shoulders, but with no very good grace. She had objected still more to Olivia coming with them,

and Fred had had hard work to overcome this objection. She had said ugly things about Olivia, and about his always wanting her to be everywhere with them. He had tried to reason with her and to point out how impossible it was to tell Olivia that they could not take her with them, since neither she nor Elsie nor Rose would ever have thought of any other arrangement. She had accepted nothing that he had said, but again had given way pettishly, and said she supposed she should have to put up with it. Reconciliation had followed, and Fred's distress at her unreasonableness had been somewhat lessened by the reason she had only then given for objecting to have Olivia with them. If there had only been four of them he would have been in the carriage with her. As it was she would have to 'bore herself stiff' for a crawl of nearly an hour. It really *was* rather hard on her that his place should be taken by Olivia, and she hated to think of his sitting outside getting wet, if it rained, as it probably would.

The sense of dismay and unhappiness returned to Fred as he sat beside the taciturn driver, and thought it all over again. The solicitude she had shown on his account, and her desire to have him with her, which had made it easy for him to accept her kiss of reconciliation, did not balance the memory of her unreasonableness, or the hurt she had done herself. Why should she 'bore herself stiff' in the company of Elsie and Rose, even if her right to dislike Olivia for no apparent fault were conceded? The phrase lit up a good deal that had caused Fred a vague uneasiness. He remembered now that neither Elsie nor Rose had said anything to him in praise of Freda for some days

past. She had once or twice said things about them which, while nothing like the praise she had been pleased to express at first, had prevented his thinking of her as having drawn back in her liking for them. But he saw now that the three girls had hardly at all been alone together in the way that would have been natural if there had been the friendship and affection between them that might have been expected, and that all three of them were surely capable of evoking. Freda had made a great friend of Penelope, and they seemed always to have something to talk about together. That was satisfactory, of course; Penelope could hardly help being improved by her intercourse with Freda. But surely her society ought not to count above that of Elsie and Rose!

Fred had been made rather unhappy, too, by the obvious pleasure which Freda took in the society of the young men who had come to Watermeads. Giles Bellamy she had told him definitely that she did not like, and he had not shown himself in the least anxious to ingratiate himself with her. But Edward Probert she had almost seemed to be 'making a set at,' and it had only been her reiterated laughing assurances to Fred that it was only he whom she loved, and that her friendship with Edward meant no more than if he had been Fred's brother—as she now thought he would be some day—that had allayed definite pangs of jealousy. With none other of the young men whom she had met had she acted in quite that way, but she had seemed to take an interest in all of them, to be testing and trying them, to wish to evoke their admiration. There was no doubt that her manner was

more lively, and her satisfaction greater, when she was surrounded by young men, than when she was alone with him and his family. Sometimes, when she had been gay and bright in a crowd, she had shown an absolute indifference to him that had wounded him sorely. She had always made it up to him afterwards, but it had left its mark. It was as if the indifference were the basis of her attitude towards him, and she wished to hide it, but could not help it peeping out.

It was not possible, however, for a young lover in the early exaltation of his acceptance to believe that indifference was really the reward of his love, from one who still gave him so much that was the reverse of indifference. Fred wrenched his mind away from these uneasy speculations, and dwelt upon the numerous causes he had for happiness.

Freda had shown the liveliest pleasure and interest in her father's proposal that she and Fred should live at Watermeads. Even here there had been a drop in the cup that had done something to spoil its flavour, for she had not shared his dislike of the idea that they would seem to be dispossessing his father and mother, nor helped him to devise means for softening the change for them. But as his father had shown nothing but exhilaration at the prospect, there had been justification for her, and it was Sydney who had entered most readily into her plans for making Watermeads what she would like it to be. Freda had shown far greater interest in the house and all its surroundings since it had presented itself to her as her own immediate home, and they had spent happy hours in plannings and anticipations. Surely Fred was the

most fortunate of men, in the prize he had secured, and the rich shrine he would have in which to house it.

And yet he was not entirely happy even in this lucky aspect of his lot. Watermeads meant very much to him. Before he had fallen in love with Freda it had been the one centre of his hopes for the future. He was to work and deny himself, and some day he would get his great reward in seeing Watermeads restored to itself, and he and his family happy and contented in its complete possession.

But the reward was coming without his having done anything to deserve it. It was falling to him too soon and too easily. The fact that it was being presented to him by a man whom, but for his relationship to Freda, he would have rather disliked, and more than a little despised, had no great weight with him, although in the negotiations that had already been opened up Mr. Blumenthal had not shown himself particularly anxious to spare the susceptibilities of Fred and his parents What was being given was being given to Freda, and he and Freda were one. It ought to have been an added pleasure to him to take back Watermeads from Freda's hands.

Why, then, wasn't it? Surely not because Freda had shown in a hundred little ways, even when she had been most delightfully in sympathy with him over what they were going to do together, how well aware she was that she was the source from which it was all to come! And yet there was no other reason that he could fix upon for his inability to feel the full thrill of pleasure at what lay before him. He would

have liked to give Watermeads to her, and she never let him forget that she was giving it to him.

Fred pulled himself back from the uncomfortable thoughts that were taking hold of him. He had so much to make him happy, and the dear girl was so sweet to him that it would be the basest ingratitude to let his mind dwell upon the few things that had hurt and disturbed him. Absurd, too, when they were going to a long evening of pleasure together. His pulse quickened as he thought of dancing with Freda. He had not danced with her since he had been so foolishly jealous, and then only once. It would be very different tonight. There would be no Lord Mayor's son to cross his path, and although he did not propose to monopolise Freda altogether, nobody could object to his taking about half of her dances—least of all Freda herself, under the circumstances.

There was no drop in Fred's recovered spirits during the dinner which preceded the dance. Lord Kirby took in Freda, and Fred sat next to her. Rose, who had been taken in by Jack, was on Lord Kirby's left, and he made much of her, and much of Freda also. Freda was more sparkling and gay than Fred had ever seen her, and he was immensely proud of the effect she was making on those about her. It was Jack who seemed to have most to do with arousing the high spirits in her. With his cheery self-assurance and readiness to get on instant terms of familiarity with anyone whom he was inclined to like, he put matters on a basis of chaff, not over subtle, about Freda's engagement, which drew a response from her that showed her more ready with her tongue than Fred had

ever known her in general company. Lord Kirby roared with delighted laughter at her sallies, and occasionally sought to give them a personal application to Rose, who, however, sat rather silent, smiling but not laughing, and appearing to wonder rather at the new light in which Freda was showing herself. She looked at her a good deal, and sometimes at Fred, to see how he was taking the constant interchange of familiar banter with another man. But Fred kept a pleased face, and occasionally joined in the chaff himself. His complaisance may have been partly accounted for by the fact that Freda was assiduous in finding his hand under cover of the table-cloth whenever opportunity offered, and pressing it.

Dancing began immediately after dinner, with the shortest possible interval for the cigarettes and coffee for the men. With the exception of the host, they were all under thirty, and the pleasures of the table were less to them than the pleasures of the floor. The dinner time conversation, with Jack and Freda as its chief performers, had reached such a pitch that it was quite in accordance with its spirit that Jack should put in a bold claim for the first dance with Freda. He affected great disappointment when she informed him that of course she was going to dance it with Fred, adding that for pure impudence some people were hard to beat. He then offered himself to Rose, but she had already been engaged by Giles Bellamy, and without showing any keen signs of disappointment he ranged round in search of a partner, beginning with the prettiest girl he could find after those two, and taking them in descending scale of looks until he found one disen-

gaged, when he proceeded to make himself just as agreeable to her as if she had headed the list.

The ball went with a swing, and Freda was the queen of it. She might have engaged herself three deep for every dance, if she had wished, but while she was prodigal of her favours to all who came near her, she still preserved herself for the claims that Fred made upon her, and kept him happy and admiring, not only of her but of the brilliant success she was making. She refused to sit out any dances with him, but he was hardly in a mood to press the request, for he enjoyed this new aspect of Freda, laughing and excited and brilliant in a crowd, and, since she made it plain to him that he and he alone was the ultimate source of all her pleasure, the more private assurance of that fact could wait for a quieter time.

But after supper, which she had eaten in his company, when the ball was nearing its end, Fred received a wound which, beginning with a mild uneasiness, grew into something that made him angry as well as hurt, and it was all Freda could do by the time the last chord was struck by the band, and the last cups of soup were consumed by the guests, to bring him round to forgiveness of her.

Fred was dancing with Olivia, Freda, for perhaps the third time, with Jack Kirby. After a few turns, Fred, whose eyes were always in search of Freda when he was not dancing with her, missed her and her partner. They must have gone off to sit out somewhere, and as Freda had refused to sit out any part of any dance with him it struck him as ' just a bit thick,' and led him to wonder whether the very rapid intimacy

that had come about between Jack and Freda was after all quite so harmless in its bearings upon himself as he had thought.

At the end of the dance, the errant couple not having reappeared, he set out on a search for them with Olivia at his side. His discomfort of mind was so evident that she could hardly affect not to notice it, and she said to him as they left the ball-room: "Let us go and find Freda. We can all four have a talk together."

He was grateful to her, and they went through the rooms into which other couples were dispersing themselves, but without finding the one they were in search of.

Fred 'cut' his next dance, when it was made painfully evident, by Freda's indignant partner coming up to him and asking him where she was, that she also was intending to cut it, and made a further search on his own account. Nearly everybody was dancing, and most of the rooms were empty. He ventured up the great staircase, but the company was not large enough to overflow the house, and unless Jack had deliberately taken Freda off to a room not in public use, which Fred hardly thought even he would have done, it was not likely that he would find them upstairs. He went into the conservatory, and opened a door leading into the garden. The night was cold and damp, but it was not raining, and it was just possible that they might have gone out.

A paved path ran along the wall of the house, and there were garden seats on it, but they were empty. Fred walked a little way towards spaces not lit up by

the windows of the house, and called Freda's name, but there was no answer.

He went through the rooms again and returned to the ball-room just as the last strains of a valse were being played. There were Jack and Freda dancing vigorously, and, to judge by their faces, in a high state of satisfaction with one another. Fred felt baulked and furious, and his feelings towards Jack were murderous.

They came up to him smiling all over, and he made a gallant effort to smooth the frown from his face. Whatever he was feeling, he could not make a scene there, and then.

They had intended to have a little lark with him, it appeared. They had been on the terrace when he had come out and called, and had given him the slip, entering the house by another door. When Jack Kirby found that he was not inclined to take this particular little joke in the spirit in which it was said to have been devised, he slipped off with a light word, and left Freda to cope with Fred.

Freda then consented to sit out a dance with him, and they had it out together. She was patient and kind, but pained at his ill-humour with her. She had meant no harm at all, but wouldn't have done what she had if she had known that he would take it like that. Surely he must see that it was only meant for fun, or how could they have laughed about it as they had when he had caught them? And surely he could trust her! She knew how much he loved her, but it didn't look like the right sort of love if he couldn't trust her out of his sight.

The poor badgered unhappy young man felt the ground slipping away from him. It seemed unreasonable still to be angry with her, and yet he could not feel satisfied, in spite of her quiet show of reason. She had sat out nearly the whole of two dances with Jack Kirby, and the interval between them, and yet she had told him that she was going to dance to every bar of the music, and until now had refused to sit out with him at all.

"Well, I did suddenly feel a little tired and hot," she said, "and when he said we would go and get cool, I said yes, without thinking."

"But why sit out the whole of the next dance, too, when you were engaged to somebody else?"

"Only to that silly little clergyman's son, who had poked himself in. I didn't want to dance with him, and had been meaning to ask you to rescue me. Really, Freddy dear, I do think you are unreasonable. You didn't mind my having heaps of fun with Jack at dinner——"

"You call him 'Jack' already, do you? And you met him for the first time an hour or two ago!" All Fred's jealousy surged up in him again, and he would willingly have wrung Jack Kirby's neck if opportunity had offered at the moment.

Freda laughed. "That slipped out," she said. "Everybody calls him Jack at Watermeads."

"Did you call him Jack when you were with him?"

"Don't be so absurd, Freddy. Of course I didn't."

"Did he call you Freda?"

"I shan't answer such questions as that."

"Please answer this one. Did he call you by your Christian name?"

"No."

"What did you talk about all that time?"

Freda appeared to be struggling with her temper, which had so far been under perfect control. Her mouth wore its ugly look, and her eyes were frowning. But when she spoke it was with the same persuasive air as before. "Well, we talked about you, chiefly," she said. "You could have listened to every word we said, and if you had, you couldn't have helped being pleased. I wish you would leave off being angry, Freddy. It spoils the whole evening, and I have been enjoying myself so much."

Fred left off being angry by and by, and even enjoyed his drive home, when he managed to squeeze into the carriage by the side of Freda, who showed great sweetness towards him. But he was still sore within him, and all through what remained of the night, as he struggled with himself to get a right view of what had happened, and what should be his attitude towards it, cold waves of doubt and dismay came surging over him, and Freda's sweetness, now that he was removed from personal touch with it, hardly made headway against the flood.

What his thoughts would have been, if he had actually overheard the conversation which she had told him would have pleased him so much, may be judged by the repetition of that conversation.

CHAPTER XXI

IN JACK'S ROOM

"I say, it's precious hot in here, and I've been dancing all the time, like a marionette. So have you. Let's go out and get cool somewhere."

Thus far Freda had told the truth about herself and Jack Kirby. What followed had not been exactly in accordance with her statements to Fred, though it had touched them at certain points.

"Well, I told Fred that I was going to dance all the time," she said, "and shouldn't sit out at all. But it *is* awfully hot."

Jack left off dancing at once, and led her away with decision. "Oh, yes," he said. "Fred won't mind. Besides, you'll have lots of time to obey him in. Better show your independence a little while you've got the opportunity."

Freda laughed. "I do pretty well what I like," she said. "It's just as well to begin as you mean to go on."

Jack did not respond to this speech, with his usual quickness of repartee. He was leading her quickly down a long corridor, past the open doors of the rooms which were being used between the dances. He opened a door at the end. "Now, we'll have a comfortable little talk," he said, as they entered the room. "Would you like me to go and get you a drink?"

It was his own room that he had brought her to, as

was evident from its furniture and decorations. On the walls were school and college photographic groups, with various other trophies of sport and pleasure such as a young man likes to surround himself with. There were a good many flowers in the room, which, however, did not look as if that sort of embellishment was customary to it. Possibly it had been intended to use it during this evening, with the rest; but its door had remained closed, and no-one had as yet entered it.

Freda looked round her in apparent surprise. "No, I don't want anything to drink, thank you," she said. "But why have we come here? This isn't one of the sitting out rooms, is it?"

"It's my own room," said Jack, with a glance at her face. "It's for me and my particular pals. I had it rigged up, but I didn't mean to let the regular horde in. Sit you down. It's not a bad room, is it? I've got all my childhood's treasures here. My first tooth is knocking about somewhere. This is my Eton 'burry.' These are the pads I got beagling at Cambridge. I say, I've got a Cambridge group with Fred in it somewhere. I think it's in a book. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, I should," said Freda, seating herself on the sofa that had been carelessly indicated to her. Although she had glanced at the door, which remained open, during the progress of Jack's somewhat voluble speech, she had apparently decided to accept the situation without comment.

He took an album from a table and showed her a photograph. "I think I'll shut the door and leave the window open," he said. "There's a bit of a draught."

Freda looked up quickly as he crossed the room, but when he had shut the door and turned towards her again she was looking at the photograph with interest, and did not seem to have noticed his remark.

"Dear old Fred!" she said. "I must tell him that you have shown me this. I don't think he has it. Are there any more of him?"

She turned over the pages. There were no more groups that included Fred, who had not adorned the aristocratic circle in which Jack Kirby had moved at Cambridge. There were a good many handles to the names written under the photographs, and Freda showed some interest in the young men thus indicated, and tracked them down from one group to another, until Jack suddenly took the book away from her. "I say," he said, "Fred wouldn't like you to be looking out for all the good-looking fellows, you know. You must keep your admiration for him, but I don't mind you giving a little to his intimate friends. You've never said how nice *I* look. Now I'm going to remove temptation out of your way."

She allowed him to take the album from her knee, and leant back against the cushions in the corner of the sofa as he put it back upon the table. "How close may I come?" he asked her with a grin.

"I think you had better sit in the other corner," she said primly.

He plumped himself down instantly. "Perhaps I might come a bit nearer if I feel cold," he said. "I'm quite safe, you know. I'm a tremendous fellow for respecting other people's property."

"Yes, I should hope so. Besides, you're somebody else's property yourself, aren't you?"

"Oh, I say! What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing. Only little birds have been whispering. And I've got a pair of eyes, you know."

"Nobody knows that better than I do. They're a pair of the prettiest optics I've ever seen. In fact, they were the first thing I noticed about you."

"Thank you very much. But you mustn't say such things about me."

"Why not?"

"You know why perfectly well. At least, I don't mind you're saying them *about* me, as long as you don't say them *to* me."

"But that wouldn't be honest, would it? Whatever else I am, I'm dead honest. I say, are you frightfully in love with Fred?"

"Don't you think he's worth it?"

"I think he's a capital fellow. Jolly lucky one, too."

"Poor Freddy! I'm afraid he hasn't been very lucky so far. I wonder he's as nice as he is, brought up in that awful house."

"What, Watermeads? Why, it's a very fine house. It's a better house than this."

"I don't think you'd say so if you were to stay in it for any time. I never knew that *anybody* lived like they do, except clerks in offices, and people like that."

"They are hard up, of course. But don't you get enough to eat?"

"Yes, of a sort; and they're putting the best face they can on it while I'm with them. Penelope told me

that it is quite different at other times. And my maid has let in a lot of daylight. It's as much as I can do to persuade her to stay with me there. It was quite a relief to dine here tonight, and see people who live in a civilised manner again—as I'm used to at home."

"Well, I'm jolly glad we thought of asking you then." He seemed somewhat at a loss to know how to treat her revelations. "I say, why are you going to marry Fred, if it's as bad as all that?"

"I didn't know how bad it was. I knew he came of a good old family, and that they lived in a big house. I'd no idea that they were so poor that they could hardly afford to live there, or anywhere else. Why, do you know how many servants they keep for that great place?"

"No, and I don't much care. I know they're hard up; but they're very nice people all the same."

"Oh, I know that you think one of them is."

His face became a trifle more serious. "Well, I do like little Rose a good deal," he admitted. "You haven't any objection to that, have you?"

"Not the least. It doesn't matter to me whom you like."

"What, not a little? Supposing—only supposing, mind you—that anything came of it, we should be seeing a good deal of one another, shouldn't we?"

"Perhaps so; perhaps not. But nothing will come of it."

"How do *you* know? You don't know what my intentions are. I haven't told you."

"Your intentions are one thing; hers are another. She won't have you."

"Did she tell you that?"

"No, she didn't. I told you before that I have a pair of eyes in my head."

"Well, what have they seen then? I think she did like me a bit. But I haven't been here for nearly a month. Has she changed? She doesn't seem *quite* so friendly as she was."

"A good many things can happen in a month. I don't know whether she liked you or not, a month ago. Probably she liked you quite well enough to marry you if you had asked her then. You're a pretty good match, you see, for a girl without any money. But you're not the *only* match in the world."

"Now look here, you've got to tell me what you mean. Don't let's have any more talking in riddles. Is there another fellow—that chap Bellamy, for instance? He seems to be always hanging round. I should hardly have thought I had much to fear from him."

Freda laughed. "If you're on the look-out for a rival," she said, "you won't find him in a younger son."

He considered this. "Her people would consider that sort of thing, of course," he said. "They'd be quite right to. But I'm quite sure she wouldn't, if she liked a fellow."

"Oh! wouldn't she?"—in a tone of innocent enquiry.

"Now what do you mean by that? What a girl you are for talking in riddles! Do you think she's the sort who would make up to a fellow she didn't care for, just because he was rich and all that?"

"It doesn't matter what I think, does it? You know her much better than I do. Besides, I never said anything about making up to anybody. Did she make up to you?"

"No, it's just what she didn't. I've been rather making up to her. Everybody knows that. But she hasn't seemed to mind."

"No, I don't suppose she has. Well, let's talk about something else. You won't get *me* to say anything against Fred's sisters, if you try all night."

"I don't want you to say anything against them. But who is it that you think is likely to cut me out? Is it that parson fellow, Probert? They wouldn't want her to marry a country parson, if they're like what you say they are, would they?"

"I wish you wouldn't keep on making me look as if I was running them down. If they are like that—*I* never said they were—it would be quite natural that they should get Edward Probert to the house as much as they could."

"Oh, you call him Edward, do you? I say, that's hardly fair. You've never called me Jack. I think you might, you know."

"Certainly not. If you think Mr. Probert's just an ordinary country parson, you're much mistaken. He is the eldest son of a baronet, of an old family, who is very rich. He is only going to be a clergyman until he succeeds."

"You seem to know a lot about him. Who told you all that?"

"Well, you can guess that it's been a good deal talked about."

"Who by? Has Rose talked about it?"

"I told you you wouldn't make me say anything against Rose, and you won't."

"I suppose you mean she has. I'd have hardly thought that of her. She isn't like that. In fact, I don't mind telling you, quite in private, you know, that I've been a bit inclined to put *my* goods in the shop-window, just to give myself a leg up; and it hasn't worked."

Freda kept silence, but allowed herself a knowing smile, looking down at the fan with which her hands were playing.

"*Now* what are you grinning at?" enquired Jack. "Upon my word, you're like a sphinx. *Have* you got anything to tell me, or haven't you?"

She roused herself. "No, I've nothing to tell you," she said. "At least, nothing that you can't find out for yourself, or don't know already. You said that people as poor as they are would naturally be on the look-out for money, and you wouldn't blame them. I wouldn't blame them, either; in fact I haven't, though it hasn't been very pleasant to see how important that side of *me* is."

"Why, have you got money?"

She looked a little surprised. If Jack had never been able to consider himself apart from such accidents as his birth had brought him, she certainly hadn't either, with regard to *her* parentage. She did not know whether to be pleased or vexed to find that he did not know her to be an 'heiress.' "I never thought about all that, before I came to Watermeads," she said. "I've often been told that father was very rich,

and of course I'm his only child. But somehow I've never thought about it in connection with myself."

"And now you do, eh?"

"Well, I can hardly help it. That awful old Mrs. Conway got father to come down and see her while we were all out. I didn't know about it till afterwards, as she kept it dark. She wanted to get something out of him, but I think, from what he has written to me since, he saw through her at once. Father is very clever. He's such a dear, too. He only thinks about what is good for me. He is quite ready to clear all the horrible debts off Watermeads, and provide handsomely for Fred and me to live there. I call that handsome of him after the way he was treated."

"You don't seem to think much of your futures-in-law."

"Well, I don't like to see the ugly side of anybody's nature. Perhaps I've been shielded from all that too much. I suppose they can't help it, as they have so much come down in the world, but I *did* think when I went to Watermeads that it was myself they liked —because they were all very nice to me at first—and it has been a shock to find that I'm only looked on as one of father's money bags."

"Poor little girl!" Jack edged himself a little towards her on the sofa, and she did not suggest, as before, that he should keep his distance. "It *must* be rather beastly. I didn't know they were like that. It makes one think a bit about one's own little affair. But it's disgusting that *you* should be bothered by that sort of thing."

He put his hand sympathetically on her shoulder.

She did not shake it off, but leant forward and wiped what might possibly have been an incipient tear from her eyes, though they were shining, and seemed quite dry. "I ought not to have told you anything," she said hurriedly. "It was the last thing I meant to talk about when we came in here. Please forget all I've said, and don't breathe a word of it to anybody outside. It would be awful if *they* were to know."

"Why, of course I should never do that. What do you take me for? I'm very glad you told me. Look here, I want you to look on me as a pal. If you've got yourself in a mess, and don't know how to get out of it, let me help you. I liked you awfully, you know, the very first minute I set eyes on you. I'd do a lot to help you, and you won't find I'm a bad sort of chap to confide in."

She used her handkerchief again, and this time there *was* a suspicion of dampness to be cleared away. "I think you're awfully kind," she said. "I suppose that is what has made me say as much as I have to you. It's rather hard to be always pretending to be in the highest spirits and to be feeling very happy when one isn't happy at all. Tonight I *have* felt rather happy; it has been so comforting to feel that people like me, not because of father's money but because of myself. You see *you* didn't know anything about the money, but it didn't make any difference to you. I suppose that is partly what has made me talk to you."

Jack did not reflect that she had talked a good deal before her father's money had been mentioned. He felt that he was better than other men in this respect, and

in particular, better than the Conways, upon whom this nice pretty girl's disclosures had thrown a sinister light. It was gratifying that she should have recognised in him a friend in whom she could safely confide. He must show her that she could trust him all the way.

He moved a little closer to her on the sofa and took the hand with which she was making play with a little handkerchief of lace and embroidery. "Look here, little girl," he said, "tell me all about it, as you've told me so much. What about Fred? He isn't like the rest of them, is he? It wasn't your money he was after when he asked you to marry him."

"I'm sure he's fond of me," she said. "He's awfully jealous. I don't know what he'll say when he knows I've been in here with you."

"Oh, we'll get out of that all right. We'll slip out into the garden, and say we've been there. He can't object to that."

Freda did not object either. "Of course, I can't be certain of anything," she said. "I've never thought about money before, but all sorts of ideas are being put into my head, and I can't help them worrying me. Fred is quite ready to live at Watermeads on the money my father is going to give me."

"What, live at Watermeads with all the rest of the family! Are they going to live on your father's money too? Surely not!"

"They are going to move to a smaller house. They will have the rent of Watermeads, and it will be their house still, and everything that will be done to it to make it like other houses will be done with father's

money. He told me that it would cost thousands of pounds to put it into order. Oh, I don't know. They're bargaining still. Father is very generous, but he doesn't like to be put upon. Fred hardly says anything to me about it. We just talk about what is going to be done."

"It all sounds pretty beastly. Honestly, I never thought they were like that. Are you sure you're not making a mistake?"

"I go by what father says. He wrote first that if he had known how things were he wouldn't have let Fred propose to me."

"Did he? That's pretty strong. I say, little girl, are you quite sure that you'd better go on with it? I can see you're very fond of Fred, and I don't think there's much wrong with him, but——"

"I can't feel as certain about Fred as I did at first," she interrupted him. It seemed that he was not to take it for granted that she was very fond of Fred.

"Well, if you feel like that, hadn't you better cut it all out, while there's still time? You must remember that if you make a mistake now you won't be able to mend it afterwards."

She rose from her seat. "I've given my word," she said simply. "It is too late to draw back now. Really, Jack, we mustn't stay here any longer. Are my eyes all right. They don't look as if I'd been mopping them, do they?"

They didn't look in the least like that, but were hard and brilliant as she stood facing him. His own were moist, with a not pleasant moisture, as he said: "You dear little Freda, if you think I've

been nice to you, give me just one kiss. I'll never tell a soul."

She did not shrink from his gaze. "You ought not to," she said. "But if you won't tell anyone, you may, just one."

He kissed her on the lips, and she returned his kiss. It was like strong wine to him, and he stood looking at her for an instant, and she at him, as if waiting for something more. But before he could speak they heard Fred's voice calling 'Freda,' from the garden.

Both of them started guiltily. "Come this way," said Jack, and led her quickly through another door from the one by which they had entered the room, into a lobby, and thence into the garden.

The long paved path was round the corner of the house, and Fred's footsteps were heard approaching them. "We'll play hide and seek with him," whispered Jack, "and say we did it for a lark."

They moved into the shade of some trees, but Fred was already returning on his steps. "Now we'll slip in and let him find us dancing," said Jack. "Darling, give me just one more."

But Freda refused. "You've had quite enough—for the present," she said.

CHAPTER XXII

AN ENGAGEMENT

Elsie and Rose went up to the room they had shared together since they were little girls, just as the sun was rising above the trees in the garden. The fit of sulks that the otherwise admirably behaved summer had recently indulged in was over, and the new day smiled broadly on Watermeads, as if to encourage the happiness that many previous days had brought it.

The moment the door was shut Rose turned to embrace her sister. "Darling, what is it?" she asked.

Elsie returned the embrace. Her eyes were full; she put her cheek against the soft flesh of Rose's neck; she was the softer of the two at that moment. "Darling," she said, "I knew you knew. Do you think anyone else has guessed?"

They fell apart, and gazed at one another, their eyes full of love and enquiry. "I've known nearly from the first that it was you," said Rose. "I've laughed sometimes when I've seen that other people *didn't* see it. Why haven't we talked about it, darling? You've known it was coming, haven't you?"

"No," said Elsie, with a happy laugh. "I thought it was Olivia all the time. And yet there was something—I didn't let myself think about it, but I suppose it was that that made me"—she hesitated—"ready for it."

"You do love him. I know you do. I knew you did."

"Oh, yes, I do. I think I'm the happiest girl in the world."

They talked to one another during the process of undressing and hair-brushing, and for a long long time afterwards, lying close together in the same bed, until the sun had climbed high into the sky, and signs of life in the house betokened that the new day had begun in earnest.

It was Edward Probert who had declared his love, in some nook of the house in which such a different scene had been enacted a few hours before. As Elsie unfolded her story it seemed like a glimpse into some shy untroubled paradise, tremulous with unimagined happiness and hope. He had always loved her, almost from the first moment he had seen her, and the longer he had known her the more his love had grown. He had not revealed it earlier, partly because of the joy of getting to know her better and finding in her always some new thing to love and to trust to, partly because he could hardly believe that his declaration would not be a surprise to her. But there had been something all the time that had led him to hope. He could not have loved her quite so well if he had not rested himself on the feeling that she showed towards him, even though she herself might be unaware of its quality. There had been no rapture of surprise when she had put her hand into his and pressed it, as a sign that she was his, but only a deep happiness almost too full for words. They were one in all love and understanding from the first. Words had been used after-

wards in the sweet intercourse of lovers, but not to bridge doubts. There were no doubts between them, nor ever would be.

Elsie wept softly for her new found happiness. Breaking full upon her in this way it was almost more than she could support. "It is like a deep well," she said. "The more I dip into it the more there is to find. Rose darling, he's so good. It isn't only that he's handsome and kind and nice all through. Perhaps I might have loved him if he had been only that —it's enough to make you love him dearly. But I feel that there's something behind all that—something that one can trust to and know that it will never fail you."

"He's a dear," said Rose. "I love him too, and most of all for loving you, who are far the best of us."

"Rose, you say you've seen. Olivia won't be——?"

She did not finish her sentence, but Rose understood it. "Olivia likes him," she said; "but she doesn't love him—not in that way. She will love him as I do, because he is going to be your husband. Oh, Elsie, how heavenly it will be having you married and living so near us."

Elsie laughed happily. "It's all heavenly," she said. "And there's so much of it that one has hardly had time to think of yet. We had very little time to talk. We didn't want to stay away for long and get noticed. We never once mentioned Lutterbourne, except that he asked me if I liked the idea of being a clergyman's wife. I *shall* like it, you know. I mean not only because it is Edward. But because it's him

I shall like it better than anything. I shall be able to help him more than I should otherwise. And he well help me, too. One thing that I *have* known about him is that he loves his church and his work. Perhaps I might have guessed how it was with me when Lady Sophia said something the other day about his having a very soft job, or some horrid expression of that sort, which left him plenty of time to amuse himself in. I felt angry, and said I knew he wasn't like that."

"What did she say?"

"Oh, she looked at me and said: 'Oh, so that's how you feel about it, is it?' *That* might have made me think, but I was only cross with her. No, I've never known that I loved him until tonight."

"I wonder if she guessed."

"It looks as if she did, now I remember what she said and how she looked. She's very sharp. Well, I suppose she'll be pleased. Everybody will be pleased, especially darling Dad. That makes me happier than ever. Oh, Rose, there's isn't anything to do with it—nothing at all—that isn't happy."

By and by, as Elsie talked, Rose grew more silent, and at last Elsie said to her: "I wonder if I should have found out about myself if you and I had talked about everything, as we always have. Rose darling, why haven't we? Now I've told you everything, isn't there something for you to tell me? I'm not to be selfish about my own happiness. I don't want to be. It makes me love all those whom I do love much more, even you, darling."

For answer Rose burst into tears. "Oh, I'm very

unhappy," she said. "I'll tell you everything. I've wanted to for a long time, but I didn't know what there was to tell. I'm not sure that I can tell you properly now."

It came out little by little. In much of what she said she seemed to be learning things about herself for the first time. She had liked Jack Kirby. She had known that he wanted something more of her than that, and it had flattered her a little, and perhaps made her want to give him more; but whatever it was that she had felt for him it had been nothing like what Elsie had disclosed of her love for Edward. "I know now that I never could," she said. "I hope I couldn't before, if he had said anything to me; but I had been thinking about other things—horrid things —and I don't know what I should have done if he had asked me, as I thought he might."

The 'horrid things' had been no more than what Jack could have given her, if he had asked her to marry him, and she had liked him well enough to consent. "We have always been so poor here," she said, "and it has made a lot of difference to us, and we have talked about it so much. Even about Fred, you and I talked openly of his marrying an heiress to put things straight. I ought not to have thought about all that side of it at all; but I couldn't help it—and I wasn't sure that I didn't love him—a little—though I know now that I don't, and never have. I thought Dad would be pleased."

"I believe Dad would have hated it. I believe it's that that has been worrying him. I'm sure he doesn't like him, and he said something to me before we went

off this evening that seemed to clear everything up—about his not being like himself lately, I mean—suddenly."

"What did he say?"

"He kissed me and said: 'Well, go and enjoy yourself, darling, but I wish Prittlewell and all its occupants were at the bottom of the sea.'"

They discussed this for a time, and agreed that the cryptic speech might have 'meant that,' and probably did, in the light of Lord Kirby's visit a week or so before, the object of which had never been disclosed. "It would be like him—darling old Dad," said Elsie. "People outside might think that he would be pleased for us to marry rich men, but we know it wouldn't count with him at all, really. He loves us too much."

"I haven't been very nice to him lately," said Rose. "I've been thinking too much about other things. But I don't want anybody but Dad now. He loves me and I love him."

"So do I," said Elsie, "and loving Edward makes me love him all the more."

"I suppose it would have been like that with me if I had really loved Jack the least little bit. It was having my mind full of him and not loving him that made me neglect dear old Dad. I'll make it up to him now. Oh, it's such a relief to have it all over and know where I am again. It's like waking up from a horrid dream."

"It can't have been so bad as that, darling. If it had, you wouldn't have been in any doubt at all."

"It seems like that now. He wasn't nice a bit this evening. He seemed to take it for granted that I—

that I wanted him; but somehow he didn't seem to want me nearly as much as he has before. He was quite pleased to have that horrid Freda making eyes at him."

The adjective was startling to both. It was the first time that any adverse criticism of Freda had been used by either of them.

There was a moment's silence. Then Elsie said with conviction: "I hate her. I don't believe she's straight; and I don't believe she loves Fred a bit."

This also had to be considered. "She is making Fred very unhappy," said Elsie. "Look how she behaved this evening—going away with Jack like that! I suppose it was to make Fred jealous. She can't be satisfied with the love he gives her. She must have scenes and excitement with it."

"I never really liked her," said Rose, "though I tried hard to at first. And I believe she hates you and me."

"She has tried to be nice—sometimes."

"She hasn't tried much, lately. I'm sure she's a cat at heart, and she can't help showing it. She likes to make us feel that we are nothing beside her, because we are poor, and she can have everything she wants. She's turning up her nose at us all the time; and she tries to make others see us as she does."

"I've thought that, too. I suppose it is natural now that I should think of everything in connection with Edward, but sometimes, when we have all been talking together, she has seemed to be saying to him that she and he understood one another, and we are beneath them altogether. I don't know why she has

done it to him particularly. I haven't noticed it so much with Giles, or the others."

"Giles doesn't like her. He told me so."

"Did he? When was that?"

"The first day. I was trying to make the best of her, and he listened without saying anything. Then I said: 'Don't you think she's nice?' and he said: 'If she marries Fred, I shall try to like her.' He didn't say any more, but he must have meant that he didn't like her."

"I wonder why he said *if* she marries Fred."

"Well, I don't believe she would marry him if she could get somebody she liked better. I suppose Giles thinks that, too. He sees a lot, though he doesn't say much."

"He has always hated Jack."

"I know, and you all used to laugh at him for it; *I* never did. I wasn't at all sure that he wasn't right. Now I think he is. At least, I don't hate Jack, but I definitely don't like him. I think it was perfectly horrid the way he went on with Freda tonight. And taking her away like that! I suppose that's what they call flirting, and perhaps that's all he wanted of me."

"I don't think so, darling. Perhaps he is what they call flighty, and is ready to amuse himself with any pretty girl. But it wasn't only that with you. He does like you awfully, I'm sure, and I can't really dislike him myself, because of that. I think he means more, too. He took you in to dinner tonight, and you sat on the other side of Lord Kirby. You were the most honoured person there after Freda. And she was first because she has just become engaged."

"Lord Kirby has always been very sweet to me. That was one reason why I thought it wouldn't be so bad, if Jack did ask me, and I could make up my mind to it."

"I think he will ask you, darling. He amused himself with Freda tonight, and I do think it was rather horrid of him, with you there. But I'm sure she led him on."

"I think so, too. Oh, don't let's talk about it any more; it's all so horrid. We'll talk a little more about you and Edward, and then we'll go to sleep."

Edward Probert came over early in the morning. His interview with Sydney Conway was short, but eminently satisfactory. Sydney was immensely surprised, having got quite another idea into his head with reference to this suitor, but upon a cursory self-examination he found also that he was immensely pleased. The advantages of the marriage offered to his daughter were beyond question, and when offered by a young man whom he liked and respected he was able to draw considerable satisfaction from them. There was Elsie, handsomely provided for, to an extent that he could hardly have hoped for her. Decidedly, a father might take pleasure in such a match for his daughter. Advantages offered by Jack Kirby had not weighed with him. But this was different.

He also found his mind wonderfully cleared of the hamper of parental jealousy that had troubled it. It was sweet to him to see his dear child so happy in her love, which rather increased than lessened her love for himself. He made himself happy in her happiness, and it was an added joy to know that for some time at

least she would not be far removed from him. After all, the dread he had indulged on his own behalf, of the first signs of love in one of his daughters, had only been the result of that passionate dislike which he had felt for the one man who had sought for them. He knew now that if the menace of Jack Kirby's courtship should be removed from Rose, and Giles Bellamy should succeed with her, he should feel just as happy about her as he did about Elsie. And Elsie had whispered him a word which encouraged him to think that that danger was now past.

Mrs. Conway received the news with equanimity and forbearance. It appeared that she had known that this would happen from the first, and she had only not said so because *her* feelings and experience in such matters were, naturally, of no consequence whatever. However, if a mother's love was of any use to Elsie at the present conjuncture of affairs, or at any future time, she might perhaps be glad to know that she had it. As for the man she had chosen, Mrs. Conway had observed him closely, and she had seen very little that she could not approve of in him. Time would show, but she was quite inclined to hope that he would stand the test. She rebuked her husband, in private, for referring to Edward's worldly expectations. Love, she explained, was too sacred a thing to be mixed up with such mundane matters, and for her part it would have made no difference if Edward had been a simple curate with no expectations whatever; she would have welcomed him just the same, and she should like him to know that. But in a subsequent conversation with Lady Sophia she showed as complete

a knowledge of Edward's immediate relationships as could be drawn from a book of reference having to do with the Baronetage of the United Kingdom, and even discussed the probable length of life that might be allowed to Edward's father, in view of that enjoyed by Sir Vivian's fathers before him.

It was Penelope who took the news to Freda, with her breakfast, which she had ordered in her bedroom at eleven o'clock.

Freda's beauty, undeniable when she was at her best, was not of the early morning sort, and she looked positively ugly when Penelope announced her astounding news.

"I thought you'd like to know, Freda. Edward asked Elsie to marry him last night at the ball, and he came over at ten o'clock to see father. So it's all settled."

"Edward! Elsie!" exclaimed Freda. "Don't be silly, Penelope. I'm not in the mood for tiresome jokes. I'm much too tired."

Penelope looked at her critically. "You do look tired," she said. "In fact you look awful. I shouldn't go downstairs if I were you before you've had another sleep. But it's quite true about Edward and Elsie. He is with her now, in the parlour. I'm very glad myself, because Elsie will be 'my lady.' Cooky told me so. Father is very pleased, too, and so is mother, though she pretends not to be. Oh, I forgot to say that Fred sends his love, and is longing for you to come down. He wants to know how long you'll be."

Freda ignored this message, and asked her some questions about what had happened. But she knew

no more than she had told already. "I can see quite plainly that *you* are not pleased," she said. "Why aren't you?"

"Oh, go away," said Freda crossly. "I've got a splitting headache, and you're making it worse with your chatter. Tell Fred I'm not well, and I shan't be down till lunch time."

CHAPTER XXIII

LUTTERBOURNE RECTORY

When Freda came downstairs at last, just before luncheon, all traces of ill-humour had left her. She was fresh and smiling, and congratulated Edward and Elsie so nicely, and with such apparent delight in the news of their engagement, that Elsie was stricken with compunction at having criticised her, and Rose, who was standing by and watching her carefully, could find no fault with her attitude. Edward was pleased with it, too. His handsome face lit up as she offered him her felicitations. "Well, we've both been through it now," he said, with a happy smile. "By and by we shall all be living close to one another, and taking an interest in each other's establishments."

Fred had come up to greet his Freda. She had forbidden him to kiss her in public, but in the atmosphere of the moment he thought he might put his arm round her waist to show that she was his, as Elsie was Edward's. She looked up at him with a loving smile, and gave him a kiss, before she disengaged herself. All Fred's doubts of the night before were swept away, and he felt as happy as a king. If Edward had secured one treasure, he had secured another. There would be nothing but peace and contentment, both at Watermeads and Lutterbourne, when the present strong emotions should have led to their appointed end.

"We're all going over to Lutterbourne this afternoon," Fred told Freda. "You'd like to come, wouldn't you? I didn't like to disturb you to ask."

The Conways had always been meaning to go over to Lutterbourne throughout the summer. Edward had suggested it several times, but Lutterbourne was nearly twelve miles away, and it had generally been too hot for a bicycling expedition, which was the only means of locomotion available at Watermeads for such distances. Edward, on his motor-bicycle, had come constantly to Watermeads, and the invitation so far had remained in abeyance.

But it was necessary now for all of them to see the house to which he was so soon to transfer Elsie, and he had torn himself away from her for an hour to commandeer a couple of cars, and to telephone such instructions to his housekeeper as would ensure a fitting welcome for a large party.

It was Freda's last day at Watermeads. She was going to join her father and mother for a month's sojourn at Scarborough, where Fred was to follow her in a week's time. Her last day was to have been devoted to Fred and the family alone, and no-one had been invited for the usual afternoon games. But she assured Fred, when they were alone together for a moment, that it would give her the greatest pleasure to go over to Lutterbourne. "It's such a splendid thing for Elsie to have caught such a swell as Edward," she said, "that we must all make as much of her as possible. Besides, I want to see the house she is going to live in. So I really don't mind, Freddy dear. We shall be able to be alone this evening."

Fred didn't like her saying that Elsie had 'caught' Edward; but she used so many expressions of that sort without meaning anything by them that he was getting used to it. No doubt she had learnt them all from her father, and would grow out of them in time. They didn't represent anything in her own charming nature, least of all this particular one, in a matter in which she had shown herself to be as unselfishly pleased as any of them. Nevertheless, he put in his mild protest. "It's odd that Elsie never had any idea that it was she Edward wanted," he said. "None of us had. We were all mistaken, weren't we—you included, darling? Freda, I don't believe you're half as sharp as you pretend to be. Now say something nice about that."

"What do you want me to say?" she asked, with a shade of tartness.

"Well, I hoped you'd say that love had blinded your eyes. I'll say it for you. You do love me, don't you, darling?"

"Oh, of course," said Freda. "But as for Elsie not knowing——! Oh, well, I'm very glad she's making such a good match, though I should think it would be rather a bore for her to have to play at being a clergyman's wife until Edward comes in for his property. I'm glad it's her, and not me. Come on, Freddy, let's go in to lunch."

The whole family crowded into the two cars, with Freda and Olivia in addition, and soon covered the twelve miles of winding road that lay between Watermeads and Lutterbourne. When they got halfway they met Lady Sophia Raine on her way to pay them

a friendly call, and after some parley Mrs. Conway joined her in her carriage, and the horses' heads were turned towards Lutterbourne.

The situation had been shortly explained to Lady Sophia as the carriage and the first car had halted close to one another. Sitting upright in her seat she had said to Elsie: "My dear, I'm very glad to hear it. I'd give you a kiss if I could get at you." And to Edward she had said: "You're a very lucky young man. I shall be near you to see how you behave, and if you don't treat her as she deserves to be treated, you'll have me down on you."

She expressed her pleasure now at length to Mrs. Conway, when they had waited for the dust of the cars to disappear, and were rolling comfortably towards their destination behind the two handsome but easy-going horses. "It's as good a match as the dear girl could make," she said, "and he's a thoroughly nice young man into the bargain, which is always an advantage in these matters. I said I should try to bring about something of the sort myself, if you remember, when he first came into the County, but I'd hardly thought of beginning to move, when, lo and behold, you've done it all yourself, Jane! I congratulate you sincerely, but confess that I didn't think you had it in you. Now you have only to bring that young Kirby to book for Rose, and you can sit down and enjoy yourself till Penelope is old enough to be provided for. Whether you'll be able to do as well for her as for Elsie and Rose is extremely doubtful, but by the time she's ready *they* ought to be able to do something for her. I once knew a poor country par-

son with four pretty daughters and not a shilling to bless them with—I won't tell you his name. The eldest picked up a Captain in the Rifles, and lucky to get him. The second—or third, it doesn't matter which, —stayed with her, and married the younger son of a peer—a man in the same regiment. The next married his father—he was sixty-five and a martyr to gout, but that didn't matter. The youngest might have done better still, with the chances she had, but she ran away with an actor. Still, it just shows how one thing leads to another in these affairs, if you only start right. Jane, I was coming over to ask you what you'd been able to manage with the Blumenthal man. You wrote to me that you had got him to come down, and promised to write again when you had seen him, but you never did. What happened? I suppose you made a mess of it, as you didn't write. I wish you'd asked me to come and help you."

Mrs. Conway told her what had happened, or as much of it as was necessary to introduce the news of the arrangement that was in course of being made, to which she was now completely reconciled. "It is not quite what I had in my mind," she said, "but the man was difficult and headstrong. I can't say, though, that he has behaved badly in the long run. Sydney is pleased with the way things are going, and I am now leaving the negotiations entirely to him. There are certain things I don't like in the arrangements; I cannot say that Freda has quite fulfilled my early hopes of her, and she is hardly doing what she might to make it agreeable to me to go and live in a small house and leave the big one to her. However, I don't

complain. Now that I know her father, I can see where she gets her obstinate and domineering spirit from, and can forgive it. I should have been quite willing to give her the benefit of my long experience in managing a large household; but if she thinks she knows better than I do about such matters, very good! So be it!"

"Oh, she's showing the minx already, is she?" returned Lady Sophia. "Well, one could see it plainly enough in her from the first. *You* won't be in a position to drive it out of her, Jane; so I shouldn't try, if I were you. Well, I think you've done well for yourselves out of Blumenthal, and you've done it without taking anything from him that you don't give an ample return for. You'll certainly be better off at Manor Farm than you have been at Watermeads, and you'll lose nothing but the burden of a great house that you can't afford to keep up. I'm very glad indeed that things are at last taking a favourable turn for you and Sydney. *He* deserves it, poor fellow, after the plucky way in which he has been facing his troubles for years. He must be delighted with this arrangement of Elsie's. I'm not sure that it isn't the best of all the things that are happening to you nowadays. There's no fault to be found with it anywhere."

Very little fault could have been found with Lutterbourne Rectory as a spacious home for a young married couple, and, but for the still more spacious surroundings that were attached to Edward Probert's future, it would have been possible to anticipate for him and Elsie a long and happy life spent there within the shadow of the Lutterbourne church tower.

The large red brick house was set in the midst of lawns and trees, and no roof could be seen from its windows but that of the church itself, the graveyard of which was separated from the garden only by a great hedge of holly and yew. The previous incumbent of Lutterbourne had been a noted gardener, with money in abundance to ride his hobby. Edward had demurred somewhat at the amount of labour and the heavy wages bill involved in keeping up the garden, but had not yet taken steps to cut any of it down. Now, of course, it would be kept up as before, and it was a great satisfaction to be able to show those carefully tended acres, with their great stretches of shaven turf, their innumerable delights of colour and scent, and the rare trees and shrubs that their late owner had planted everywhere. If it was known far and wide as a 'specimen' garden, it was also one in which care had been taken through long years to plant for beauty as well as interest. Not even the Watermeads gardens, beautiful as they were in their wilder growth, could beat that of Lutterbourne Rectory in sylvan charm.

The house was less attractive in its existent state, though it held out the most encouraging promise. Edward had furnished only his study, a dining-room and a few bedrooms. The rest was a large emptiness, but clean and swept, and showing that satisfactory quality of dignity, proportion, and subdued ornament, which was the fine gift of the men who built such houses as this two hundred years ago. What could have been more delightful for a prospective bride than to be introduced to such a house, and told that she

could have her way with it? It was the first-fruits of the tangible gifts that were to be brought to Elsie by her young lover, whose command of the means to supply such accessories to married life as a house furnished exactly as she should wish it to be, came in for the first time to enhance the joy he had already given her in offering himself. That he could give her a home, and at once, was all that had hitherto mattered to her, in the accidents of his lot. What he could give her over and above could not make him the more dear, but was something for them to share together that would add pleasure to a life already in prospect overflowing with it. Elsie could hardly speak as they all went over the rooms together—her heart was so full. It was as if a miracle had happened to her, which had changed her completely from the girl she had been twenty-four hours before. It was too soon as yet to plumb the depths of her happiness. She could only move quietly along her appointed path, and allow its waves to wash gently over her.

So she talked little, but the rest of them talked a great deal, and much was settled for her about which she was not even capable of forming an opinion.

Edward's only trouble was that as host and *cicerone* it was impossible for him to get a moment alone with Elsie. He wanted to say just the loving private word that would seal her his anew in this first visit of hers to their future home. The side that was there for all the world to see he could exhibit to the crowd, but there was another meaning that the old house, consecrated through years to happy family life, was waiting to whisper to her ears alone, with him as its

interpreter. The need to touch those chords became so insistent with him that when Lady Sophia drove up and he went out to welcome her, he managed to say, behind Mrs. Conway's broad back: "Do for goodness' sake manage for me to be alone with Elsie just for a few minutes."

Lady Sophia nodded her sapient sympathetic head, and directly they had reached the sitting-room, said: "You two go and look at the church together. I've got something to say that I don't want you to hear. You can come back in ten minutes."

When they had slipped away, she announced that she had nothing to say except that she would be glad of a cup of tea as soon as possible, but that if *she* didn't arrange for the young people to have a few minutes alone together nobody would think of it.

Edward and Elsie went as far as the church porch, and sat on one of its old oak benches. They were in complete privacy. The hot summer air brooded over the flowers and grass of the churchyard, which was kept like a garden. The humming of the bees and the noise of rooks in the Rectory elms were the only sounds that broke the stillness. Time seemed to be pausing for a blissful moment in this quiet green spot, consecrated to the eternal rest of those who in their time had gone through such sweet emotions as had come to these young lovers, and had now passed to where love has a more perfect fulfilment than the happiest of lovers can know. The sweetness of the vows which these two renewed in the shade of the porch was touched with solemnity. They went into the cool still church. It would have as much to do with the life

they were to lead together as the house where their days would be spent. They knelt for a little time at the altar rails; it seemed natural to both of them to do so, and neither had asked it of the other. When they rose again, they kissed, standing where they were before the altar, and looking into one another's eyes, but not speaking, and then went out to join the rest.

Tea had been served in the garden, under the shade of a great lime on the lawn. They were still sitting in a group when the noise of a large motor was heard from the other side of the house, and presently Jack Kirby made his appearance, from the French window of one of the rooms, and advanced towards them with the air of one receiving a warm welcome.

There were those among them who were quite pleased to see him, of whom Edward, who had not forgotten that it was at Prittlewell he had put his happiness to the test, was one. But his arrival was not an unmixed pleasure to others, and it had the effect of breaking up the group, which showed a tendency to move away in separate particles, as he explained to all and sundry that he had motored over to Watermeads, and hearing that everybody had come to Lutterbourne thought he might as well come too. By the time that he had settled himself to his overdue tea, Sydney Conway, with Elsie, Rose, Olivia and the three children, had moved off. Fred had made efforts to get Freda to come, too, but she had remained seated in her basket chair, ignoring his touches and whispers. So he had perforce remained himself, standing awkwardly at her side, with annoyance beginning to dis-

turb his mind, and a strong distaste for his one time friend's society growing stronger and stronger within him.

Jack had thrown a look at the three girls moving away across the lawn, as if he would either have called them back or thrown out a promise of joining them by and by; but his eyes had returned to Freda, who was evidently not intending to move, and this had apparently satisfied him. It had all passed in a second, but had been as plain in its meaning to Fred as if it had been put into words. Jack wanted to amuse himself with somebody when he had finished his tea, and if Rose was not there, then Freda would do very well.

It was Lady Sophia who announced to him the news of the engagement. "I suppose you don't know what has happened yet," she said, in her uncompromising fashion, "or you'd have produced one of your graceful speeches, as it came about at your little entertainment last night. There's a happy man here, and I think you might help yourself to what you want, and let him go off to find company that he'll enjoy a good deal more than yours."

Edward, who had been supplying the wants of his belated guest, laughed and went off at once, to escape further explanations and congratulations. Jack, who had been about to put a piece of damp tea-cake into his mouth, arrested its progress and stared. He was seldom to be seen at a loss, but he was so seen now, as the meaning of Lady Sophia's words penetrated to his understanding. He changed colour a little, and again he threw a glance at Freda, of enquiry and suspicion.

Lady Sophia laughed openly at his disconcerted air. "Oh, you needn't be alarmed," she said. "Nobody has been trying to steal a march on *you*. It's Elsie that has been fallen in love with, and if Rose gets half so nice a husband she'll be a lucky girl, but I don't see any signs of his coming from anywhere at present."

Jack had recovered himself during the progress of this speech, and made appropriate comments on the news imparted to him. Lady Sophia cut them short by announcing that the gnats were more than usually troublesome and that she should go and sit indoors until her carriage came round. She invited Mrs. Conway to accompany her, and ordered Fred to go and tell her coachman to be ready in half an hour.

Fred inwardly confounded his godmother, but could not very well escape obedience to her instructions. "Come with me," he said to Freda. "You haven't seen the stables yet."

Freda looked up at him with a clear gaze. "I don't want to," she said. "I hate the smell of stables, and it's very hot. I'll stay here and keep Mr. Kirby company."

"We shan't give you the slip a second time," said Jack, with a laugh. "You'll find us sitting here like good children when you come back."

Fred went off, the set of his shoulders showing acute displeasure. He was hardly out of earshot before Jack said in a low voice: "Can't we get away somewhere before he comes back? *You* can make it all right with him afterwards."

But Freda was not quite ready for such an open overthrowal of all allegiance—or else not ready to allow Jack to believe that he could have his way with her. "I'm very comfortable where I am, thanks," she said.

He threw her a baffled frown, but said coolly, "Oh, all right. I thought you'd like a little talk, that's all. What about Rose, and what you told me last night? I believe you were kidding me about Rose."

She laughed at him. "So that I could gain your attentions for myself, I suppose," she said. "That's how I should have done it, isn't it?"

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"Oh, how dull you are!" she said with a shrug of the shoulders. "If I had wanted to put you off Rose, should I have told you she liked somebody else better than you? It would have made you jealous, and all the keener. At least, I should think so, if you're like everybody else. I told you what I thought was the truth, because we were talking as friends. If you don't believe that, *I* don't mind. I can do very well without you as a friend."

He grinned at her. "I don't quite know what to make of all that," he said. "I can't do without *you* as a friend. I like you far too much. I say, I don't believe Fred has found that footman. Do just come for a little walk."

"We'll go and find the others if you like," she said unconcernedly, rising from her seat. "I'm not going to hide myself with you again, if that's what you want."

"Come along then," he said, springing up to join

her, and they went off together in the direction that the others had taken.

The lawn merged into a thick growth of trees and shrubs, and it was some time before they found the rest of the party in the further spaces of the garden. Fortunately for Fred's peace of mind when he hurried back from his search, they were all together.

CHAPTER XXIV

OLIVIA SPEAKS

The post bag at Watermeads was usually brought in about halfway through breakfast. It was unlocked at the table and the letters handed out by the head of the house, usually with appropriate comment. During the past few days its coming had been more eagerly looked for than ever before. Freda had been gone five days; Edward wrote to Elsie every day, although he also saw her every day; the negotiations with Mr. Blumenthal were nearing completion; and Giles Bellamy had departed from Watermeads a week before, summoned to his brother, who was ill, in Switzerland. He had become so intimate with the Conways that news was awaited from him just as if he were a relation.

"One for you, Elsie; Lutterbourne postmark; I wonder who that's from. Bill, bill, circular, circular. Mr. Blumenthal to me; that will settle us up, I hope. Here's one from Giles at last; hope it's to say he's coming back. That's all. Fred, my boy, that young woman of yours wants keeping up to the mark. Perhaps there's something enclosed in her father's letter."

There was an enclosure in Mr. Blumenthal's letter, but not the one that had been suggested. It was a cheque for a thousand pounds, and the missive that accompanied it simply said that he enclosed payment as

agreed for the picture he had bought, and should like it packed and sent to him at an address in London as soon as possible. He should be writing on other matters shortly.

"Well, that's very kind of him," said Sydney. "A cheque for a thousand pounds doesn't come our way every day, does it? Still, I never actually agreed to sell him the picture; it has never been mentioned in our correspondence. You only told him that you would put the offer before me, didn't you, mother?"

"I said I did not think it likely that you would care to sell anything," said Mrs. Conway. "He then increased his offer from five hundred pounds to a thousand, and sent me rather an impertinent message by that objectionable woman Parker asking me not to forget to put it before you. I have mentioned these facts more than once already, and the remembrance of them is painful to me. They are exactly as I have told them, and if I could be relieved of repeating them all over again I should be glad."

"Yes, I thought that was how it was," said Sydney. "Well, it's a very handsome price to offer, and if he's so anxious to have the lady I think we'll send her to him, and keep his thousand pounds. What do you say, children?"

"If *I* might be permitted to give my opinion," said Mrs. Conway, "I should wish to point out that his money has already been allocated to a certain purpose. If the negotiations with Mr. Blumenthal are brought to a satisfactory conclusion, which I have no reason to suppose they will not be, it was to be used for adapting Manor Farm to—to——"

"To a residence suitable for a family of distinction. Quite right, mother. It must be put aside for that."

"If it is accepted now," said Mrs. Conway, "it will be frittered away. I am not speaking without experience. The money that was received for the sale of——"

"Oh, surely we don't want to go into all that, mother! If I pay the cheque in, I shall keep the money for what is decided—except a few pounds, perhaps—but no, I don't know that we should want to spend any of it; Grandfather John's benefits are far from being exhausted yet. Still, I'm inclined to agree that it would be better not to take it till all the business with Blumenthal is finished. What do you say, Fred? It looks as if he were offering this to make things easier for us. He *was* quite certain that the picture wasn't by Holbein, wasn't he, mother?"

Mrs. Conway shut her eyes wearily, and opened them to say: "I have already said so several times. I will repeat it again if you wish."

"Well, I shouldn't like to take advantage of his generosity. What do you say, Fred?"

Fred aroused himself from the dejection into which he had fallen at not having received a letter from Freda for three days running. "Somehow I don't seem to see that sort of generosity in him," he said. "I should think it's more likely that he wants to get something more out of you on our behalf, and thinks he'll tie your hands by sending you the cheque now. *I* don't want any more than you've already offered, father. You've given way enough as it is. If you can do without the money for a bit I should send the

cheque back to him, and say that you'll complete this bargain with the other."

He spoke with some bitterness. Apart from his disappointment with Freda, to whom he had written long and loving letters every day since her departure, he was becoming more and more incensed with the businesslike attitude of Freda's father. A delicate affair of this sort ought to have been settled with the utmost regard for the feelings of those concerned. But it was being conducted as if his father needed to be bound down at every point, in case he should take advantage of some loophole to escape the liabilities upon which he had shown himself nothing but accommodating; while Fred himself was being treated as if it were no affair of his whatever, and he was just to consider himself part of the bargain—and not the most important part either—that was being struck on behalf of Freda. A great deal of his pleasure at the prospect of living in a revivified Watermeads had disappeared during the process of the negotiations. He would be living there as the pensioner of Mr. Blumenthal, and it was becoming increasingly plain to him that Freda would do little to make that obligation sit more lightly upon him. He thought that his father, who was so open-handed to others, though always ready to skimp himself, felt the way in which he was being treated, and he was determined, if he could, to save him further annoyance.

"Oh, well, business is business," said Sydney. "At least, business men are always telling one so, but it seems to me that they do rather make troubles for themselves in it which they might avoid. I'll write and

tell him I will hold his cheque, and we'll settle up everything together—sale of the picture and all. Now let's see what our friend Giles has to say."

Giles Bellamy had written shortly to say that his brother was dead, after a short illness. He was bringing his body back to England, and might have to be at home for another week. After that he should be returning to Watermeads.

That was all, except messages of greeting to the family, and only Sydney knew how much was meant by his news. Mrs. Conway, it is true, said: "Then Mr. Bellamy is now in the position of an eldest son," and sat ruminating. But Sydney said shortly: "Oh, no, he told me that his brother had a child," and she had by that time reflected that, whether elder son or not, Bellamy's eligibility was not so marked as that of Edward Probert, and did not feel sufficient interest in him to enquire whether the child was a boy or a girl.

When Sydney came to think it over by himself, he could not remember that Giles had said more than his brother had a child. Whether it was a boy or a girl was likely to be of some importance to him, if his father's property was entailed, as probably it was. It was of some importance to Sydney, too. He had rushed with relief to the idea of Giles marrying Rose, as a refuge from the distasteful thought of Jack Kirby marrying her. But there was a good deal of difference between Giles Bellamy as a landscape artist, even if a rising one, and Giles Bellamy as an elder son. Supposing that it should turn out that he should take his brother's place, then nobody, not even Sophia Raine, could say anything but that he would be a

good match for Rose from the material point of view. They would not say so otherwise, since they had been expecting her to marry Jack Kirby.

Sydney was inclined to believe that Giles's brother had left a little girl. It would fit in so well; and things were in the way of fitting in well at Watermeads just now. These favourable winds blew in cycles, and it was very long since they had blown at all. It was highly improbable that they had blown themselves out yet. Yes, the little Bellamy was almost bound to be a niece and not a nephew. And Rose was almost bound to fall in love with Giles, if he once showed her that he was in love with her. She certainly liked him, very much indeed—all of them did at Watermeads. Sydney especially had found him a more agreeable companion even than Edward Probert, whom he also liked.

As for the detested Jack Kirby—that menace seemed to be fading away. Nothing had happened on that evening at Prittlewell, which had seemed to him to have been arranged to the end that the thing he dreaded might happen. And at Lutterbourne on the following day, when Jack Kirby had pushed himself in among them, Sydney had had him under his eye the whole time, except when he had been drinking his tea with Fred and Freda. He had talked and laughed in his usual free self-satisfied manner, with Rose and all the rest of them, but he had made no attempt to get Rose to go away with him alone, as he had so often done at Watermeads, and had said goodbye with no announcement of another visit shortly. Nor had anything been seen of him since. Sydney understood that

he had left Prittlewell, and might not be down again for some time. Such pieces of news filtered through. And yet it had seemed to be settled, from what Lord Kirby had let out, that he would be spending some time at Prittlewell, and chiefly on account of bringing his courtship of Rose to an end.

Well, if he still wanted her, but was inclined to put off his wooing, he might now find that whatever chance he had seemed to have was gone, and a better man than he had taken his place. Sydney hoped that Giles Bellamy would not tarry. Elder or younger son, whichever he might be, he would be welcome. He was a man, and one to whom a father might well trust his daughter's happiness.

It was Sunday, and no games were played at Watermeads on Sundays. Mrs. Conway, who had not played games since her childhood, had made this rule when her own children were very small, and often referred to it, as being in the nature of a feather in her spiritual cap. There was no narrowness of mind in it, she was wont to explain. She would not say that games on Sunday were wrong—except cards and billiards—nor that the Christian Sunday should be kept like the Jewish Sabbath. But it was better to mark one day in seven off from the rest, and by devoting Sunday to thoughts suitable to the day, and refraining from ordinary amusements, the rest of the week would be all the brighter. This consolation was sometimes needed by the active-minded active-bodied family to whom it was offered, when Sunday afternoon was hanging heavy on their hands; but on this particular Sunday afternoon the air of pause and quietness

was agreeable to most of them after the excitements they had recently gone through.

Olivia was the only visitor to the house, and she was now again so much a part of the family that she was hardly like a visitor. She came up from her Sunday-school and stayed until it was time to go home to give her father his tea. Fred, who was feeling unhappy, and in need of some distraction of mind, walked across the park with her. It was in his mind that he might talk to her about Freda, to whom she had always shown herself courteous and kind, although Freda had not liked her and had taken no particular pains to hide the fact. He found it difficult to talk to Elsie and Rose about Freda. They said nothing against her, and sometimes succeeded in saying something nice about her; but it was becoming plain to him that they did not want to talk about her at all, and it was only by resolutely shutting his eyes to the obvious inference from that fact that he could avoid an unpleasant shock to his sensibilities.

They went through the garden and out into the park through a little hand gate. So far neither of them had spoken. Olivia was one of those whose very silence is companionable, and Fred, busy with his thoughts, was already soothed by it. He had known her so intimately and for so long that there was no necessity to keep up a flow of chatter with her, as with other girls. She looked beautiful in her graceful free-moving youth—far more beautiful, if he could only have seen it, than Freda, whose looks depended not upon the quiet soul that was in her, as did Olivia's in some measure, but upon her mood of the moment,

and more than a little on the way she was dressed. Olivia wore a white frock and a big black hat. Her fine tapering hands were ungloved, and she held some roses in one of them, but needed to hold nothing to give them employment. A fair indication of character may be drawn from the way hands are carried when they have nothing to do.

Olivia spoke first, and sympathetically to the point, while Fred was searching for an opening phrase. "This is rather a dull Sunday for you, I'm afraid. One seems to miss people one loves more on Sunday than on other days. I used to miss father frightfully on Sundays, when I first went abroad. I'm sure you must be missing Freda."

"Yes, I am," said Fred. "And there's no second post on Sundays, which makes it worse. I've only had one letter from her since she went away, and I can't think why."

It would have been easy enough to make some light excuse for Freda's silence, which would have carried with it no consolation; but that was not Olivia's way. "It is a long time to be without a letter," she said, "even if you do get one tomorrow morning. I don't wonder at your being bothered at not hearing from her. Still, one does learn to make excuses for people who don't write when you think they ought to. No two people are quite alike in the way they look upon their duties as correspondents."

"I should have thought that if you loved somebody very much you'd have wanted to write to them," said Fred, out of the bitterness of his heart.

"I know. That's just what one does think when

one feels sore at not hearing. But it doesn't follow really." She smiled at him. "It would with you," she said, "and I think it would with me; perhaps it would with most people. But one knows from one's own experience that there are exceptions. You will forget all about Freda's silence when you do hear from her, Fred."

"Oh, I shall get a letter tomorrow all right," he said more cheerfully. "I ought not to let myself feel annoyed with her. I don't know whether it's a particular failing of mine to be irritable. I never used to think it was. I suppose when one loves somebody very much one is apt to be exacting. All sorts of things upset one, and yet when they come to be explained there's nothing in them."

Olivia knew that irritability was not at all a failing of Fred's, and she knew how much reason Freda had given him for being constantly under its sway. She also knew something about Freda that she had not breathed a hint of to anybody, and she had been very deeply exercised in her mind as to what she ought to do about it. She had been walking in the wooded part of the garden at Lutterbourne Rectory with Bobby, a little in advance of the rest, just before Jack Kirby and Freda had joined them, and she had seen what she had seen through an opening in the shrubs, though nobody else had seen anything.

Now, suddenly, her duty in the matter seemed to be plain. Knowing what she knew, Fred's speech seemed to her infinitely pathetic. He was constantly being upset by signs of Freda's essential indifference to him, of which Olivia, after what she had seen, had no doubt

whatever; and she was very clever in explaining them away. That was what it had meant, though he was far from knowing it. Wasn't it better to give him a hint of the truth, however painful it might be to him, than to go on as she had begun, encouraging him to think that Freda loved him as he loved her? She did not ask herself whether it was possible for her to tell him the damning proof she had of Freda's unfaithfulness to him, in the kisses she had allowed Jack Kirby to shower on her, and had in some measure at least returned; nor whether what she could find words to say to him would do anything to break the illusion he was under. She simply felt that it was impossible to keep silence while he, her friend, was being so cruelly deceived. What would come of it must come; but she saw nothing but increasing unhappiness for him in the path he was treading. She would at least set up her warning in it.

"Fred," she said, with a catch in her breath. "We are very old friends, you and I. I must say something to you because of that that I hate saying. I think that all the little things that hurt you—and some of them aren't little things—ought not to happen, and wouldn't happen if she loved you as you love her. You can't imagine them happening with Elsie and Edward. I don't believe that the explanations she gives you, and that satisfy you for the moment, are always true ones. I think she does just what she likes, and makes up any excuse that she thinks will satisfy you. She doesn't treat you as she should."

Fred's surprise at this speech was so great, that for the moment he could not rally his thoughts to it. Its

significance, as spoken by Olivia, passed him by; it fitted in only too well with what he was feeling about Freda himself, though he was doing all he could to keep off the convictions that were crowding in upon him. "She often makes me very unhappy," he said. "But she has made me very happy, too. I can't *not* trust her. That would be the end of everything."

Olivia was at a loss now. She had spoken on the impulse of the moment, and without any definite end in view, except to relieve herself of the burden of making false excuses, and to set up her warning for him. But how could that warning be made effective, unless she were to tell him what she had seen? When she had once spoken, she knew that she could not do that, at least now. It would cover her with shame. Not even for Fred's sake could she do it, though she wanted so much to help him. Then how was she to open his eyes?

She spoke hurriedly. "I have seen many things," she said, "and so have Elsie and Rose, and others, too, which make me sure that it is Watermeads she wants, Fred, and not you. It sounds a horrid thing to say, and you know that I wouldn't say it unless I were quite certain. I tried—we all tried—to be nice to her, when she first came; we felt that we must trust her, just as you feel. But it was of no use. She hates me —I don't know why—and she doesn't like either Elsie or Rose. She doesn't like anybody but herself. She isn't worthy of you, Fred."

Fred had recovered himself now. "What are you saying, Olivia?" he asked, in a hard voice. "I love Freda, and she is going to be my wife. You and she

don't like one another—I know that—but you ought not to speak of her like that to me."

"How does she speak to you of me, Fred?" she asked quietly.

He hesitated a moment. "I have never heard her say anything against you without protesting," he said. "But even if she has, it's quite different. If it were anybody else who had said what you have—except perhaps Elsie or Rose—I should never have spoken to them again. Please don't say that sort of thing again."

They had come to the gate leading to the Vicarage garden. Olivia put her hand upon it and stood facing him. She felt no irritation against him for the manner in which he had spoken, but only a deep pity for him. "Dear Fred," she said, "it hasn't been easy to say what I have, but I know that I was right in saying it, because of our old friendship. If you will think it over, you will know that I shouldn't have said anything like that just because she and I don't get on well together. It wouldn't be me to do it. I know that you are very unhappy, and I know that you have reason to be unhappy. It is because I don't want you to be more unhappy still that I have spoken. Goodbye!"

She held out her hand, but he did not take it. He turned and left her without a word.

CHAPTER XXV

SUNDAY NIGHT AND MONDAY MORNING

When Fred turned away from Olivia at the gate of the Vicarage, he did not go home again, but crossed the river and went through meadows and country lanes until he reached the beech woods that rose above Watermeads to the north. There he spent some hours, wandering about in complete solitude, and sometimes sitting at the roots of a great tree, poking the red beech mast with his stick, his face always set in dejection, and seldom raised to the bright green roof above his head.

Olivia's words had bitten in to him. At first, as he walked quickly away from her towards the distant shelter of the woods, he was angry. What right had she to speak like that? Didn't she know that to reveal her dislike for Freda in that way would make her own position impossible, since they would be living side by side, perhaps for years to come? He would keep it from Freda, of course, but how could he overlook it himself, as Freda's husband? It would always be between them. And what was it that she had spoken for, except to express the same sort of dislike against Freda that Freda had expressed against her, and that he had refused to listen to, even from Freda. He supposed that these mutual jealousies, or whatever one liked to call them, were not uncommon amongst girls;

Freda felt them, and so, unfortunately, did Elsie and Rose. But it was not like Olivia to express them.

No, it was not like her. Almost unwillingly he came to recognise that her speech to him could have been dictated by no such feeling. He knew her far too well to make it possible for him to believe it.

The conviction only added to his distress. It was not Olivia whom he wanted to think about, but she remained to him, when his anger against her had died away, a quiet insistent voice, which only too surely strengthened and pointed what another voice within himself had been striving to say, if he would only listen to it, now for many days past. He was still trying to turn a deaf ear to it, not yet ready to allow it to be heard, and to balance what it had to say against the proofs he clung to that it was a lying voice. All his unhappy thoughts were gropings amongst memories to find support for the wished-for conviction that Freda loved him. He would admit the force of no evidence to the contrary; but the evidence was becoming increasingly vocal, and to combat it piece by piece strained his faith to the breaking point. When at last, as dusk was falling, he made his way homewards, he had reached no conclusion; the one he had wished to reach was further from him than before, and the opposing one he was still keeping at bay. But he was more unhappy than he had ever been, and when he reached home went straight up to his room, feeling physically ill, and unable to play his part in the life of his family.

When Olivia had spoken as she had, and gone indoors, she had a revulsion of feeling which caused

her to ask herself why she had spoken at all. What good had she done? What good could she have expected to do? Unless she had been prepared to tell Fred what she had seen in the Lutterbourne garden, he could only have taken her warning as an expression of dislike towards Freda, and it was natural that he should have rejected it as he had done.

But she had felt a strong impulse to speak out, and while she did not examine herself as to the source of that impulse she yet knew that it had been a right one, and by and by she was asking herself what she could do further. For she felt more strongly than ever that Fred was preparing for himself a lifetime of unhappiness, and it was the duty of his friends to save him, if they could, while there was yet time.

One thing became clear. She need no longer keep to herself what she had seen. She could tell it at least to Elsie and Rose, and they three could take counsel together. It would be a relief to share the base secret, which seemed to stain her mind whenever its image came before her.

She told them as they walked slowly home from church together in the falling darkness, just at the time when Fred was leaving the sylvan chapel of his unhappy thoughts, buoying himself up with memories of love passages between himself and Freda, but still sinking under the weight of other memories.

To Elsie, who had been feeding on thoughts of love so pure and untroubled, the disclosure was a stinging shameful blow. To Rose also it was painful hearing, about the man who had certainly made love to her, up to the very time of his treachery, although the qual-

ity of his love had been suspect from the first. Olivia had not ignored the shock that it might be to her to hear of Jack Kirby's lightness; but with her clear eyes she had seen pretty well how matters stood with Rose, in spite of the silence that had been religiously kept between the three girls. She would do best to keep up that pretence of there being nothing between her and Jack Kirby, and if Rose was still in doubt about him, the revelation of what he was would clear her thoughts; Olivia would be helping Rose as well as Fred by her disclosure.

Rose spoke first. "How horrid and disgusting!" she exclaimed indignantly. "Why, he had only seen her for the first time the night before!"

"It must have begun then," said Elsie, after a short pause. "It's all horrid, and we needn't think too much about it. It makes her what we have felt her to be, and it's what she is that matters."

Rose wrenched her mind away from the disgust and contempt she was feeling against Jack, and turned it on to Freda. "Fred *couldn't* marry her if he knew," she said. "He ought not to marry her. I'm glad it happened. There's no doubt about her now, but we have all ready known what she is for a long time, except poor Fred."

But who was to tell Fred? As they talked it over, the disclination of all three of them to do so became stronger. Face to face with a man's love for a girl who was unworthy of him they felt instinctively that there were aspects of it which they could not gauge. They shrank from the thought of how Fred would take the disclosure. Supposing he were to hear it, and still

go on! None of them formulated this unpleasant dread, but it was there in the background of their minds.

It was Rose who told her father that evening. She had taken the duty upon her. She would say nothing that would imply a personal interest in what had happened, but she divined now how unhappy the fear of an attachment on her part had made him, and she wanted him to know that the fear was groundless, and to know it thus indirectly from her.

He heard her with a grave face, and kissed her before he spoke, in token that the shadow between them was cleared away. "I can't say I'm surprised," he said. "I was doubtful about her from the very first, but wouldn't admit it to myself, and made the best of her. But it has become plainer and plainer to me that she only accepted Fred because she thought him a good match, and that she doesn't really care for him."

"But Fred isn't a good match, is he?" said Rose, —"in that sort of way, I mean?"

"Oh, well, one doesn't see these things until one is put upon the track. People like that want something that their money alone can't give them. It wouldn't occur to one that they could expect to get anything particular out of us, as we are now. But now I know Mr. Blumenthal, from the dealings I've had with him, I can see how it goes with him. With the money he's prepared to spend, which probably isn't enough for him to miss, Freda would have a good deal more here of what they want, than she could get by marrying somebody of their own sort. He sees that, I know, and

I'm afraid it's only too plain that she sees it, too, and that that's why she accepted Fred."

"She must have loved him a little—surely!"

"I don't know. She can't have helped liking him. I doubt whether a girl like that has it in her to love anybody much. She must be thinking of what she can get out of them all the time."

"But, father dear, how *could* she let—Mr. Kirby treat her like that?"

The 'Mr. Kirby' instead of the 'Jack' which had never failed to offend his ears every time it had been spoken, fell gratefully on them. "Mr. Kirby," he said, "would be a great feather in her cap, if she could catch him. She'd throw over Fred tomorrow. If it has gone as far as this shows it has, she probably will throw him over tomorrow. Very likely that's what her silence means. When Fred does hear from her it will be to say that she finds she doesn't love him enough, or some such nonsense; anyhow, to break it off."

"Oh, if she only would! That would be the very best thing that could happen."

"I'm afraid it would. But it will be a blow to poor old Fred."

"Shall you say anything to him about what Olivia saw, father?"

"Not till after he has had her letter. If she doesn't write what I think she will,—well, I suppose I shall have to tell him. We'll see what happens."

Freda's letter came the next morning. She had been thinking it all over, she wrote, and although she hated to give him pain, she thought it better to be truthful and say that she had found out she didn't love him

enough to marry him. She had thought she did at first, and would take all the blame for the mistake. But he had often made her unhappy, by the way he hadn't trusted her, and although she had been patient and put his mistakes right many times, she felt that she could not go on doing that for ever, and they must grow further apart instead of coming nearer together. It also, it appeared, had made her unhappy to find that so much was expected at Watermeads to be done by her father. It was plain to her now that she herself counted for very little. Nobody really liked her, and she wanted affection above all things, and couldn't live without it. She had done all she could herself to please them, but supposed that it was impossible for them to regard her apart from her father's money, and of course, if that was the general feeling about her, nothing she could have done would have helped matters at all. But it had hurt her very much, and as the arrangement that had been suggested was that the whole family should live next door to them, when she was married, she would never be able to get rid of this feeling, which would grow worse instead of better.

This was the gist of her letter, which ended on a note of forgiveness for all the wrong that had been done to her, and of hope that if ever she and Fred did meet again they would meet as friends. He must understand, however, that her decision was final.

Fred began to read this precious missive at the breakfast table, but had not gone far with it before he rose and left the room, to be alone with his pain.

It was severe enough, but he was more prepared for

the news than he had imagined, and the good stuff in him enabled him to bear it with fortitude. Even as he read the sentences that showed the feline nature of the girl he had loved, above every other quality in her, his illusions began to drop away from him. She was like that. Olivia had put it plainly, and he had seen it, too, thought he had shut his eyes to it. He had fallen in love with a face and a form, and endowed their owner with attributes which nothing she had ever shown him had proved her to possess. This vigorous shake was already separating the two elements that were necessary for love. The face and form remained to wound his thoughts whenever he thought of them and longed for them. But such longing was weakness to be resisted. Nothing else in Freda was worthy of love, and even as his heart throbbed its worst he was already turning away from her with something very like contempt for what she essentially was, and the healing process had begun.

He went to find his father. Sydney looked at him with a slight apprehension. He knew well enough what had happened, and was glad of it, but feared how Fred might be taking it. But a glance at his face reassured him. He had been rather weak under the influence of his passion, but the strength in him would enable him to throw it off.

"Well, dear old boy," said Sydney, when he had read the letter, not without muttered expressions of impatience, "you'll know how sorry I am for you without my having to say it. But I'm damn glad, too. Yes, damned glad. Now, I'll tell you something about her."

He told him, and Fred laughed bitterly at the recital. "When I read what she wrote there," he said, "it did come to my mind to write back and tell her that she was mistaken about me, and that I did trust her, and always should. I'm glad I felt I couldn't do that, before you had told me what you have. To think of what she said to me about that fellow only the night before! No, I *knew* I couldn't trust her, though I didn't know why. We'll never let *him* show his face here again—the blackguard! Did you say it was Rose who told you? What does she feel about it?"

"Oh, Rose is all right. I think one might have trusted Rose a bit more than one did about him. I don't believe it would ever have come to anything, even if this hadn't happened. She'd have seen through him. Well, dear old boy, it's hard for you, but you're well out of it. A girl who would let herself be kissed like that! I never really liked her, and latterly I'd come definitely *not* to like her, though I tried not to show it. One felt she wasn't straight."

This was too much for Fred just at present. He said: "Well, it's done with now. I shan't answer her letter. I don't like the things she says of all of you. There was no necessity for it, as she was breaking off. She might have let me down easier; but perhaps it's just as well. I might have wanted to mend it, and now I don't. But I don't want to talk about her just yet awhile. I did love her, and I suppose I do still in a sort of way. It hurts like the devil; but I shall get over it."

When the news was broken to Mrs. Conway, she said that it was what she had expected from the be-

ginning. "When she came up to me and kissed me," she said, "I felt that it was a Judas kiss. I felt a shudder run down my spine. I said to myself: 'Is this the girl my son has brought me to love as a daughter?' You will all do me the justice to remember that I hid my feelings. I saw you all making much of her, deceived by her surface attractions, which to me meant nothing, and less than nothing, and I asked myself whether you had all been stricken blind."

"But, mother dear!" expostulated Elsie, "we all had to be nice to her at first. We didn't know what she was like, and she did try to make herself agreeable. I think we all saw through her pretty quickly."

"Very well, Elsie," said Mrs. Conway, in a tone of patient forbearance. "Then we will say that nobody was deceived but myself. I have no wish to bandy words, and, as you are now engaged, you naturally know more about such things than your own mother. We need say no more about it; but what I should wish to know, if I may be permitted to ask, is what becomes of our plans about Manor Farm, and what it is proposed to do about Mr. Blumenthal's cheque for the Holbein."

"I shall send it back," said Sydney. "As for Manor Farm, I'm afraid there'll be nothing doing. I'm sorry, because I had looked forward to all that, and I think we should have been better off there than here. However, we must just go on as before, and trust to something happening to keep us going. After all, it's rather a relief not to owe anything to Mr. Blumenthal."

"If I might be allowed to make a suggestion," said

Mrs. Conway, still speaking with an air of infinite patience and self-renouncement, "it would be that Mr. Blumenthal's cheque should *not* be returned to him without further consideration. I am wholly against the sale of valuables from this house, as I have often said before. Pictures and other treasures are disposed of, and——"

"And the money that they fetch is disposed of too," interrupted Sydney. "Oh, yes, mother, we know all about that. Well, in this case we won't dispose of the picture. I'm very glad I didn't pay in the cheque. I don't want to be beholden to Mr. Blumenthal for anything."

Mrs. Conway shut her eyes, and opened them again. "If I might *sometimes* be permitted to continue a speech!" she suggested. "What I was about to say when you interrupted me, Sydney, was that in this one instance the picture is not one that we particularly value. I for one, though I have not pressed the view, have always had a strong dislike for the type of face it represents, and have often felt uncomfortable at looking up and finding the eyes fixed upon me. However, that is not the point. What I should wish to point out is that Mr. Blumenthal, being what he is, is not likely to have offered a considerable sum of money for something of which he does not know the value. He struck me as being remarkably astute in such matters—in some ways unpleasantly so—and I personally can see no obligation entered into by accepting the price he is ready to pay for something we are ready to sell. I might just as well say that I was under an obligation to the butcher who buys a sheep

from me, or a lamb, at the market price, or to the dairyman who——"

"Yes, it's a good parallel, mother. You needn't press it. If it was purely a matter of business with Blumenthal——! Perhaps it may be, but it would be going directly against the principle I've always adopted in selling things, and that you have felt at least as strongly as I have. We don't want to sell pictures or anything else unless we're in actual need of money that we can't get elsewhere. We're not in actual need of money just now, though we may be in a year or so's time, unless affairs improve. We were going to use Blumenthal's thousand pounds for adapting Manor Farm. As we're not going to adapt it, but go on living here, I think we won't sell the picture."

"I will say no more," said Mrs. Conway resignedly. "If there were any chance of my being listened to, which I ought to know by this time there is not, I should ask why the idea of our removing ourselves to Manor Farm should be given up. I should perhaps have urged that the advantages to ourselves of having a smaller house to keep up are the same as they were yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that. I might have pointed out that Mr. Blumenthal is not the only wealthy man in England at the present time, and that by advertising in papers, as is done every day, someone might be found who would be pleased to take this house off our hands, and pay whatever sum might be agreed upon per annum for doing so. However, I should only be talked down, and I prefer to keep silence."

"It isn't a bad idea, you know," said Sydney re-

flectively, "to see whether there's yet a chance of letting Watermeads furnished. The game has been let down to almost nothing, but there's plenty of cover, and anybody who cared about having a place like this might be willing to do all that was necessary in return for a nominal rent. I'm afraid we should almost have to give the place away, but at any rate it would be kept up, in a way we can't do ourselves. I think your suggestion's worth turning over, mother. But Blumenthal—no! I won't sell Blumenthal a picture or anything else. I've done with Blumenthal, I hope for ever."

CHAPTER XXVI

FREDA PULLS IT OFF

Nothing had been said to Mrs. Conway about what was known of the passages between Freda and Jack Kirby, nor had they been mentioned at all amongst those who knew of them, since Rose had spoken to her father. But there was an uneasy feeling that something more would be heard. They had not yet got rid of Freda and her 'ways.'

Light began to trickle through when Lady Sophia came over on that Monday afternoon, to ask about something that was worrying her. She had got hold of one of the threads of a possible story, and wanted to see if she could collect a few others.

Sydney and the girls were playing tennis, with Edward Probert; and Olivia was in the garden with them. Fred had gone out for a long walk over the hills. Mrs. Conway and Penelope were in the parlour together.

Penelope had taken the news about Freda with unexpected feeling. She had burst out crying, and said that she loved Freda, and asked why she had not written to her, if they were never going to see her again. She had not even sent her a message.

Mrs. Conway was still carrying on the work of consolation, when Lady Sophia was shown in. But her sensible speeches had so far failed of their effect, and

Penelope was still fighting against the sense of desolation that had come over her when she had first felt herself to be betrayed. She clung to her mother's side, and refused to be dislodged upon hints that the visitor had something to say which she wished to say in private. "If it's about Freda," she said, lifting a tear-stained resentful face, "I want to hear it. Everybody is against her but me, and she was very kind to me, and I love her."

Mrs. Conway, adamant in imposing her will upon all around her except Penelope, had not the fortitude to send the child away against her expressed wish, and Lady Sophia had no particular objection to saying what she had to say before her, if Mrs. Conway did not object to her hearing it. Besides, the end of another thread showed in Penelope's speech.

"Why is everybody against Freda?" she asked.

"I am sorry to have to say," said Mrs. Conway, adapting the tone of her speech to Penelope's infant ears, "that Freda has behaved very badly."

"She hasn't," said Penelope hotly. "She says that Fred doesn't love her enough, and she doesn't want to marry him. And she knows that nobody likes her here, she says, and it isn't true. *I* like her, and I shall write and tell her so, and ask her to come back. I know her address at Scarborough, and I shall write this afternoon."

A fresh burst of tears punctuated her speech. "Oh, she's in Scarborough, is she?" exclaimed Lady Sophia, as Mrs. Conway essayed to assuage Penelope's grief. "That lets in daylight. And she has written to Fred to break off her engagement! I see. Yes, it's begin-

ning to fit in now, and, upon my word, it's been a pretty quick business."

"I don't want to hear anything more," said Penelope, breaking away from her mother's heavy blandishments. "I shall go and talk to Cooky. She didn't like Parker, but she did like Freda. She and I were the only ones in this house that did, except Fred, and Fred hasn't behaved well to Freda. She says so, and *I* believe her, if nobody else does."

She flung out of the room. "Poor child!" said Mrs. Conway. "She has a loyal and tender nature, and naturally at her age it is difficult to see ill in anybody. I wouldn't have it otherwise, but there is no doubt, Sophia, that you and I were right in our first estimation of that girl's character. She has behaved shamefully—abominably. I am only thankful that she was found out for what she is before the marriage took place; otherwise I tremble to think what would have happened in the future. We have been nursing a viper to our bosoms. I abominate strong language, but in this case it is excusable."

Lady Sophia asked a few questions which put her in possession of the facts, as far as they were known to Mrs. Conway. "Yes, I see it all now," she said. "Upon my word, I can hardly help admiring the girl's cleverness. If she brings it off with young Kirby, she'll have done a stroke for herself in a few days that one would hardly have believed it possible she could have managed in weeks. Oh, but she's clever! But *what* a minx! Oh, what a minx!"

"What upon earth has young Kirby to do with it?" enquired Mrs. Conway, much mystified.

"Oh, well, I'll tell you. That afternoon we went over to Lutterbourne something struck me about those two. I really could hardly tell you what it was exactly; it was so slight that nobody else noticed it. But I was pretty certain that there was an understanding between them. Well, George and I dined at Prittlewell last night, and I disengaged a few facts. The first was that they had only met the night before I noticed them eyeing one another, and I thought I might perhaps have been mistaken, as it would hardly have given them time for anything. But I didn't allow enough for that little minx's cleverness. She had set herself to catch him, and done it on the barest opportunity. Upon my word, it's a masterpiece, as we used to say in Norfolk."

"I wish you would speak plainly, Sophia," said Mrs. Conway, with a slight approach to the air of weariness with which she was wont to protest against the stupidities of her own family. "I can't make head or tail of what you are saying."

"No, I don't suppose you can," returned Lady Sophia. "You wouldn't think it possible that she could have brought it off in so short a time, or thrown dust in all your eyes while she was doing it. Well, I'll go on. Lord Kirby took me in, and he wasn't nearly so jovial and country-squirish and inclined to slap one on the back as usual. I'd already found out that he was as pleased at the idea of young Jack marrying Rose as you could be, and it crossed my mind that something might have gone wrong there, and that was the reason why he was depressed. I'll own I hadn't put two and two together then, which was perhaps stupid

of me; but I had very little to go on, and wasn't thinking of Freda for the moment. Well, I brought in Rose's name, and I saw I was right about his being down in the mouth about that, from the way he took it. I didn't press him in any way, but asked him presently where his son was. Oh, he had had an invitation to shoot grouse in Yorkshire. He didn't know when he'd be back, and he said it in a way to make me think he didn't much care. He didn't want to talk about Jack, I could see, and I didn't go on; but after dinner I got a little more out of Lady Kirby. It is a fact, is it, Jane, that Freda is now in Scarborough?"

"Yes, certainly, she went to join her parents there. But——"

"Well, then, young Kirby has gone to join *her* there. Lady Kirby told me—*she* hasn't tumbled to anything whatever yet—that Jack's shooting engagement wasn't for another three or four days after he left Prittlewell, and he was spending the interval at Scarborough. She laughed about it, and said her husband was annoyed, as he wanted him at Prittlewell. She didn't know what on earth he was doing with himself at Scarborough, but supposed he was up to some mischief. Well, we *do* know what he's doing at Scarborough, and I wish I'd known at the time that that was where your little minx had gone."

"Do you mean to tell me," exclaimed Mrs. Conway, "that——"

"Oh, my dear Jane, it's all as plain as a pike-staff now. It was pretty obvious from the beginning that she didn't really care about Fred, but was only using him as a climb-up out of her suburb. Why on earth

people like that *always* go and settle themselves in suburbs, if they're so anxious, as they always are, to get out of them again, I don't know. But there it is. She got herself down here, at any rate, and directly she saw somebody who would suit her better than Fred, she made a set at him. Well, all I can say is that if she does manage to hook him she'll deserve all she gets by it. *I've* never seen a smarter piece of work. Why, it was all done in less than twenty-four hours, and the second time she can't have been alone with him for more than a couple of minutes, yet there he is following her up! I shouldn't wonder if she *has* hooked him by this time. You see she waited for a few days before getting rid of Fred. Most probably she didn't write to him until she had made sure of the other. She's too sharp to throw over one certainty without getting another. The next thing that we shall see will be a paragraph in the paper. But Lord Kirby won't like it; I'm pretty sure he won't. Well, Jane, I'm afraid it's an end of our plans for Rose."

Mrs. Conway's brain was in a whirl. She had known her friend to build up enormous structures before upon a single brick as foundation, and the whole edifice to collapse when the brick had been discovered to have been out of place, or not strong enough to bear the weight. But she had never known her actually invent a fact upon which to build. In this instance she would not have said that Jack Kirby had gone to Scarborough unless she were sure of it; and his object in going there was plain enough, even if the suspicions Lady Sophia had claimed to have had of him and

Freda beforehand might have been the fruit of her own fertile imagination. It was certainly very 'odd,' but she could not bring herself to believe, without further proof, that it had all meant what Lady Sophia had unhesitatingly taken it to mean.

"I think you must be exaggerating," she said. "There is no doubt about young Kirby having paid very marked attentions to Rose. I have not been at all anxious that anything should come of it, as I have a strong objection to early marriages, and Rose is not yet twenty. But I have not interfered in any way because, unfortunately, any interference on my part would most probably be only the signal for revolt. A mother's word and a mother's love in this family count for nothing. However, that is not the point. Of Freda I can believe anything. *She* would certainly do all she could to attract a young man in that position, and it is quite likely that she may have thrown over Fred, so wickedly, because she has hopes of being able, as you say, to 'catch' young Kirby. But I cannot believe that he would be so foolish as to be caught in that way. He has eyes in his head. He can see what she is."

"Oh, well, so has Fred got eyes in his head, and he didn't see what she was. How is poor Fred, by the by? He's very well out of it, but he can't be feeling particularly spry for the moment, I should think."

Mrs. Conway said that Fred had not considered it necessary to inform her how he was feeling. A mother's love was ready for him, if he felt any desire for it, to console him for the worthless love that he had lost, but apparently it was valueless to him.

"Well," said Lady Sophia, "it's rather unfortunate that two of the marriages we have hoped so much from should have collapsed at the same time. Still, Elsie's engagement is satisfactory enough, and we must be content with that for the present. Somebody else will turn up for Fred; Rose, too, I hope. There's plenty of time. What I *am* interested in now is to see whether that little minx will pull it off. I will let you know, Jane, the moment I hear anything, and if you hear something first you must let me know. If she does come to Prittlewell, I shall make the best of her; but the first thing I shall tell her will be that she has behaved very badly to Fred, and that I saw through her from the very first."

Whatever comfort there may have been in this for Lady Sophia, there was very little for Mrs. Conway, who might think that she persuaded others that she also had seen through Freda from the first, but was well aware in her own mind that she had done nothing of the sort. The whole episode of Freda's visit rankled more and more in her bosom. She saw herself taken in by the girl's careful behaviour when she had been feeling her way, and then gradually thrown over, and treated first with indifference, and then with ill-disguised contempt. There had been passages of arms with her latterly that Mrs. Conway had revealed to nobody. Freda had made it clear that she saw through her intention of keeping the reins in her own hands, and had taken a pleasure in slighting her claims, and showing her that after her own marriage, when she should take up her abode at Watermeads, Mrs. Conway would be expected to keep her place and not interfere.

This had all been very hard to bear, and but for the tangible advantages that would come from the marriage the harassed lady would have declared open warfare and done her best to end the arrangement.

And now, on the top of all this, the advantages had been withdrawn, and there was nothing to show for the slights that she had suffered. They rankled intolerably. This chit of a girl, who but for her father's wealth would probably have been ogling men as waitress in a tea-shop—so Mrs. Conway gained some slight relief in putting it to herself—had been deferred to by those whom she had simply used as a stepping-stone to still greater advantages for herself. Mrs. Conway burned to tell her that such a family as themselves would be degraded by having anything to do with her, and would willingly have sacrificed one of the remaining treasures of Watermeads to have done so before Freda had herself cast them off. And worse than anything was the thought that, possibly in the near future, this same intolerable chit of a girl might be in a secure position, ostensibly higher than their own, to use scorn of them still further. It would have been through them that she would have raised herself to the position, and the scorn would be all the harder to bear because whatever steps might be taken to repel it would not hurt her in the least.

As for Freda having taken Rose's property away from her—which was how the irate lady expressed it to herself—it hardly bore thinking of. The separate factors of the whole were of such maddening quality that she could only take refuge in a sense of their incredibility. It was like a nightmare from which she

must awaken to find that at least the fear of Freda marrying Lord Kirby's son and heir was one that could be laughed at.

That prospective relief, however, was wrenched from her when Lord Kirby paid another visit to her husband, and, with an extremely downcast air, confessed that he had been mistaken in his son, and that he was being asked to accept as his daughter the girl whom he had welcomed to his house only the week before as Fred's prospective bride.

His purpose in coming at all was not at first plain, but when Sydney understood that it was a somewhat surprising claim upon his sympathy, he responded to it warmly. He had been rather ashamed of the way in which he had received Lord Kirby on his previous visit, and seemed to himself to have behaved rather like a snob in pointing out the superiority of his own birth to that of a man who had raised himself to what would generally be considered a still higher level. After all, Lord Kirby, even if he *had* rested himself upon his wealth and title, had shown himself eager to endow a penniless girl with them, and as that girl was Sydney's daughter, Sydney need not have sought to wound the donor of the gift-horse by such a very hostile criticism of its teeth.

Lord Kirby heaped coals of fire on his head by saying, with a dejected air: "I'm afraid you were right about Jack after all, Conway. It isn't right for a young man to be so changeable in these matters, and I didn't think he had it in him to behave as he has. I suppose you saw something in him that I never have seen, and, as it turns out, you were quite right in ob-

jecting to him as a husband for your little Rose. He isn't good enough for her, and I've told him so pretty straight."

"Oh, well," said Sydney. "I never felt that his attentions to Rose were much of a compliment to her; but I've been very sorry since that I expressed myself about them as I did to you. I did dislike the idea of a marriage, and I suppose I allowed myself to get too much worked up about it. I can see now that if he had looked upon it in the same way as you did, I shouldn't have had anything to feel sore about."

"Ah, that's just it," said Lord Kirby. "It's finding him just ready to rush about after a pretty face, and being ready to pay for what he wants with marriage that gets at me. I don't know that I was any better than other young fellows when I was his age, but I didn't marry in that way, anyhow. I wanted something more than a pretty face, and I got it, and have been a happy man ever since. Jack would have got it with your little Rose, and one of the prettiest faces with it; I'm hanged if I think he will with this girl he's taken up with now, and I've told him so, pretty straight."

"Is he determined to marry her?"

"Oh, he's off his head about her. She's led him on. She's a cunning one. I saw it beginning at my own table, but never thought it was more than youthful high spirits. She must have got hold of him that very evening,—and engaged to your son, too, and no doubt throwing dust in his eyes while she was playing for a bigger fish! You'll excuse my putting it like that, Con-

way. In the eyes of a girl like that, of course my boy would be a bigger fish than yours."

"Oh, yes," said Sydney, with a laugh; "we're not going to quarrel about that sort of thing any more. Well, it's plain enough what she is up to. I wonder that he can't see that himself. Does he suppose that she suddenly fell in love with him at your ball, and forgot all about Fred on the instant, like Romeo with Rosaline and Juliet?"

"I saw Mrs. Pat play Juliet," said Lord Kirby. "I don't know what he thinks about it. He just wants her, and he's determined to have her. I suppose she knew how to play her cards so as to get him. I do think she's done most of it, Conway, and I told Jack so pretty straight when I wrote to him. He's annoyed about it, but I don't care. I thought I'd just come over and ask you what you thought about it—whether there's any real reason why she should have chucked over your Fred, nice fellow as he always seems to be—whether he got tired of her, or anything of that sort, I mean—just so as to see if there's any excuse. When a girl is going to marry your son, you want to think the best of her you can, naturally. I don't like it, but I'm not going to cut myself off from Jack, and I shall have to make the best of it."

"Oh, then he *is* going to marry her."

"Oh, lor' yes. Didn't I say so? He's proposed and been accepted. It will be in the papers tomorrow or the next day."

"Well, I'm afraid I can't give you any consolation," said Sydney, after digesting this piece of information. "Fred was devoted to her, and treated her with the

utmost patience and kindness, though he'd had good reason to see which way the wind was blowing before ever this happened. No, there's no fault she can find with him, nor I think with the rest of us. The best I can say is that, having got what she wants—and a great deal more than she could ever have expected to get—it will be to her own interest to behave herself. Nobody is bad all through, and she's no exception to the rule. We all liked her well enough as long as it was to her interest to make us like her. Oh, you'll get along with her."

"It's cold comfort," said Lord Kirby.

CHAPTER XXVII

FRED GETS ON

It was fortunate for Fred at this time that the approach of a General Election, to be fought mainly on an issue extremely interesting to the Right Honourable Mark Drake, should have aroused that ancient Parliamentary war-horse to activities that he had long since laid aside. It was one of his numerous little oddities that he liked to stay in London when the greater part of his friends and acquaintances were out of it; and when Fred wrote to him from Watermeads in the middle of August, to tell him the news of his broken engagement, and to say that he should be glad if he could give him some work to do, he summoned him up to London at once, and kept him so busy that he had little time to brood over his vanished hopes.

His uncle found Fred an unexpectedly competent helper. He had always been diligent and methodical in whatever he had taken in hand, and spared himself no pains and no time in doing whatever he was set to do to the very best of his ability. He was always amiable, and watchful of his chief's requirements. The old man, who hated to think of himself as old, whose brain was as active as ever, but whose strength was decreasing, was sometimes irritable and captious, but he was not like Cousin Henry, on the look-out for occasions for blame, and grew more and more attached to Fred, as

he grew more to rely upon him, and to find him always responsive and accommodating. Clever, too, he began to discover, in a way he had certainly not expected of him, when Fred had taken his fancy and he had offered him a secretaryship that he had looked upon as little more than a sinecure. Fred's modest abilities, which had been somewhat at a discount in Cousin Henry's office, where initiative was wanted to give them fruition, showed up very well when he was required to get up a subject under his chief's tutelage. He got up his subjects remarkably well, and showed an increasing interest in them. His uncle was delighted with him, but did not tell him so. He only showed that he liked to have him with him; and his fits of irritability made but a slight mark upon the cordiality of his general behaviour.

When he had been working with his uncle for three or four weeks, Fred was surprised to wake up one morning and find himself feeling happy. He was looking forward with zest to his day's work, and the pleasures that would come with it. These were, in detail, just the ordinary habits of a young man with enough money to live the life of his fellows in that part of London where men with money, young, middle-aged and old, most do congregate; but it was all fresh and delightful to Fred, who had hitherto lacked this feeling of assurance and opportunity.

He had found for himself a set of rooms in Westminster, from which there was an open view of the river and the Houses of Parliament. Uncle Mark had made him a present with which he had been enabled to furnish them, chiefly with things that had been sent

up from Watermeads. These bright rooms were still a new and a great pleasure to him, and with the conveniences and the excellent service attached to them were more agreeable even than his rooms at Cambridge, and much more so than his rooms at Hillstead.

He liked the valeting he got, and to feel that he could be well-dressed without anxiety as to his tailor's bills. He liked the way in which his breakfast was served, which was the only meal he had in his rooms, and was somehow different from the one that had been put upon his table every morning at Hillstead, though its constituent elements were the same. Sometimes he walked across St. James's Park to the Bath Club, to which he had lately been elected, and breakfasted there, after a swim. He generally lunched at his other club, and was beginning to make friends there; for clubland is never empty even in August, or perhaps Mark Drake would not have found himself so comfortable in London during that month.

In the evening he dined either at his club, or at a restaurant, if he did not dine with his uncle. He often worked in his rooms afterwards, and sometimes went to a play or a music-hall, in company; but not very often, because play-going now meant stalls, or at least dress-circle, instead of pit, as heretofore; and four hundred pounds a year is not unlimited wealth.

On this sunny September morning life seemed to be very good to Fred, as he stood at his window in his pyjamas—silk, from a shop in Bond Street—and looked out over the sparkling river. Then he suddenly realised that there was something missing, and stopped whistling to wonder what it was.

He was a little shocked to discover the reason. He had awoke without that uneasy sense of loss which had never been absent from his first waking since he had received Freda's letter of dismissal. Nay more; he had been fully awake for at least five minutes, and her image had only just crossed his mind, and that without any sense of drop in his spirits, but only a little added seriousness at the thought that it should be so.

The seriousness merged into grateful relief of mind as he examined himself on the bearings of this portent. He was cured, and in an incredibly short space of time, considering the weight of the malady he had laboured under. Or if not completely cured—for Freda's image was to return to him many times yet, and, even as he thought about her now, had power to trouble him—yet convalescent, with recovery beyond all doubt.

He had fought hard against the tyranny of his passion, but had never been able to rid himself of the expectation that what he was fighting for would bring some result other than emancipation from it. Some day he would meet Freda again. She would see that he was indifferent to her, and it would disturb her. She could never be anything to him again, and when she should have married another man she would not want to be. But she would at least see what she had lost; for, naturally, if he had shown himself less dependent upon him, during their engagement, she would have been more dependent upon him, and the probability was that he would not have lost her. He would, in fact, retrospectively, get back some of his own.

But this morning, for the first time, such expectations were seen to be not worth hugging to himself, to

have been indeed but the dregs of desire for her of which he had not yet been able to purge himself. He saw Freda at last free from the veil of illusion which had always clung about her, and if some shreds of the veil would blow before his eyes yet for some time longer, he would still be able to see her in the main for what she was—a snarer of men's hearts, but with nothing to give in return, or at least nothing that would have brought him any happiness when once the novelty of possession of her had worn off. He was free from his shackles, and could enjoy the new life that had already become pleasant to him to the full. As he walked up to his uncle's house later in the morning, the bright September sunshine had a fresh quality of brilliance for him, the life all about him was gayer and brighter in his eyes. He was a new man, and a happy one.

It was on that same morning, by a chance that made him afterwards mark the day with a white stone in his memory, that his uncle showed him what headway he had made in his favour, and what he was prepared to do for him. This was nothing less than to help him to a seat in Parliament, and to see him through with the career that he had offered to his father thirty years before, and withdrawn upon his marriage.

The suggestion almost took Fred's breath away. It was made in characteristic fashion, at the end of their morning's work together. Mark Drake stood before the fireplace, in which a few logs were burning, for age had chilled his blood, though it had not bowed his frame nor wrinkled his face. He was a fine figure of an old man, with his fresh colour and his white hair

and pointed beard. He was always very carefully dressed, and the only relaxation of costume he allowed himself in the privacy of his own house was a plum coloured smoking jacket in place of the black braided morning coat which he wore out of doors.

"We shall have the General Election on us in three or four months now," he said, "and we're coming in with a majority that's going to beat all records. The new Parliament is going to be largely one of young men, and I don't see why you shouldn't be in it, Fred. I've been thinking lately that I should like to see you there, chiefly from selfish motives. I've got a good deal to say still, and I should like to have some of it said in the House. It wouldn't be a bad thing for you, either, to have me behind you until you found your own feet. How do you feel about it yourself?"

Fred had little to say, except that he had never thought of such a thing at all, and that he doubted his own abilities.

"Oh, as for that," said his uncle, "you're not a genius, but you're not a fool. I thought you were when I first saw you, and it won't do you any harm with your constituents if they think so, too, at first, for most of them will be fools themselves and they'll take to one of their own sort. As a matter of fact, you're just as well up in the subjects we've been working at as most of the talkers who will be stumping the country between now and Christmas, and a good deal better than many who will get elected without any difficulty. You've never spoken in public, but it's no more difficult to get the hang of that than to know what to write, and you've learnt to do that better than I should

ever have expected of you. You've got a tongue in your head; in fact, you rattle it a bit too much for my taste sometimes. You're always pleased with yourself if you make a joke, even if it's a damned bad one, and that goes a good way with an audience. You'll find you can't make one bad enough to prevent some ass from guffawing, and carrying the rest with him. Oh, you'll do all right on the platform. It will be different in the House; but we can talk about that when you get there."

"What about a constituency?" asked Fred. "I think it would be rather a lark, but time is getting on."

"Well, I don't carry safe seats in my pocket, as some people seem to think I do. There aren't any safe seats now, either, for us, though the other side will find themselves in the same boat in that respect, this time, unless I'm much mistaken. But I think I can manage to get you adopted as a candidate somewhere. We'll try for a County constituency, if we can find one. A country gentleman, or his son, is still worth something to us, especially if he isn't too advanced. I'm less advanced than I was by reason of age, and you're less advanced than you might be by reason of knowing very little about it all. You can keep to Free Trade as your main plank; a few gags will do for the rest, for this election anyhow, and you must throw some sops to the Dissenters, but for God's sake don't say that I take that view of their epoch-making requirements outside. Oh, you'll do all right, as an amiable young ass of the land-owning classes, with his heart in the right place and his ideas sound as far as they go. I'll pay all your expenses, and make you whatever allow-

ance is necessary. Now we'll go and lunch at the Reform."

Thus Fred was launched on a course that would have seemed impossible to him a few weeks, or even a few days before. He was inspected by the enlightened electorate of West Russetshire, or by such of them as essayed to direct the opinions of the rest in the direction in which Fred was prepared to go, and made an agreeable impression on them. The former candidate on his side had also been a young man anxious to win his Parliamentary spurs, but had unexpectedly succeeded to an uncle's peerage. His type had been found to go down well, and Fred was the nearest approach to it that could be procured at such short notice. Besides, he was going to cost nothing, either to party or local funds, and was hoped to be in the way of getting a few big guns down to speak for him. His opponent was a carpet-bagger from London, with a foreign name that was thought to be worth a good many votes to Fred's side, and his way entirely to make, both in public and private life. So was Fred, in truth, a carpet-bagger, but stress was laid upon his stake in the country, as represented by Watermeads and its acres; and as Meadshire and Russetshire were a good many counties apart, the meagreness of his stake, in its present condition, was not embarrassingly apparent.

As our story is concerned with Watermeads, it will not be necessary to follow Fred's fortunes in the contest into which he threw himself with such vigour during those autumn months. Its effect upon himself was that by the time it was over Freda had become noth-

ing but a memory to him, which was hardly even painful. He was heart-free, and enjoying his life immensely.

One cold November afternoon, Fred, who had just arrived in London from one of his numerous visits to his constituency, went to the Bath Club for a Turkish bath. Simply attired in a blue checked duster, with another thrown over his shoulders, he entered the largest of the heated chambers and found it tenanted by a figure in a similar lack of costume. The figure, already in a profuse state of perspiration, was that of Jack Kirby.

Now Fred had already considered what he should do when he should meet Jack Kirby, which he must sooner or later, either in London or in Meadshire. Two months before, he would have turned his back upon him, for he had done him an injury which he was powerless to resent in any other way. But lately he had come to see that Jack Kirby had done him no injury whatever, but, on the contrary, relieved him of something that would have made all his life miserable. This view of the situation had also been impressed upon him by Uncle Mark, who had perhaps most endeared himself to Fred by the feeling he showed at the way in which he had been treated; for sympathy had been very apparent under the attitude of cynicism which he had adopted towards the affair, and it had been grateful to feel that in some measure he was inclined to make Fred's trouble his. Uncle Mark had dispensed himself from the engagement he had long since made to shoot partridges at Prittlewell in September. He didn't mind old Kirby, he said, but he wasn't going to meet

that young cub, or run the risk of meeting the girl who had behaved so badly. "You're well out of it, all the same," he had said, "and the next time you meet that conquering hero I should tell him so, if I were you, and wish him joy of his bargain." So Fred had decided that he would not cut Jack Kirby, when he should meet him; and now that he had at last met him, he was prepared, if not to follow his uncle's advice, at least to show no signs of embarrassment.

Jack, however, showed them strongly, as Fred said: "Hullo! Having a stew?" and arranged the blue checked duster from his shoulders on to the back of a canvas chair, so as to temper the first shock of heat to his frame. Jack Kirby seemed to feel the need of more clothing, and less personal moisture, to support the encounter with dignity, by the movements he made as he replied: "Oh, how are you, Conway? I didn't know you were a member here."

Fred carefully arranged himself in his chair. The dryness of his skin seemed to give him an advantage over Jack Kirby, which he made haste to use before it should disappear. "When are you going to get married?" he asked affably. "I saw the notice of your engagement in the paper, but I haven't seen any notice of the wedding yet."

Jack Kirby mopped his super-heated brow. "Look here, Fred, old chap," he said. "We've always been pretty good pals, and I've felt rather bad about taking the wind out of your sails in the way I did. Still, a fellow can't altogether help himself in these affairs, can he? I wouldn't have done it unless I'd fallen desperately in love with Freda."

"I'll forgive you," said Fred. "I fell in love with her myself, and I know what it's like. How is she, by the by?"

"I suppose you mean you're not in love with her any more," said Jack, rather sulkily. "Well, she didn't treat you very well, I'm bound to say. She didn't care about you—I've found that out—and she ought not to have let you think she did, or got engaged to you."

Fred felt a slight sensation of discomfort, either at this direct statement, or at the first pricking of his pores. "Why did she get engaged to me, then, if she didn't care for me?" he asked. "She didn't tell me that in her letter, and I should rather like to know."

"Oh, well, she thought you were rather a bigger bug than you turned out to be." Jack Kirby was beginning to pick himself up a little. "I don't blame a girl for thinking of that sort of thing when she wants to get married. Most of them do. She thought she'd get on with you all right, but when she came to try it she found she couldn't. I don't blame her for saying so, either, and cutting it all out while there was time—though of course it was a nasty jar to you."

"Well, it was rather, at the time. But I don't blame her much, either, now, for swopping me for a bigger bug than I had turned out to be. I suppose you've satisfied yourself that she won't swop you for a bigger one still, if he happens to turn up."

Jack Kirby did not rise to this provocation. "It's a rummy thing," he said, with an air of some dejection, "that I never used to think I should mind if a girl I wanted took me because of all that sort of thing. But I find I do, Fred, old chap. I don't mind telling

you, because I can see quite plainly that, though you may be a bit annoyed at what happened—and quite rightly, too; I should myself—it hasn't really hit you. You're not in love with her any more, are you now?"

"Well, no, I'm not," said Fred. "I shouldn't have said it myself, at least not to you, but as you've tumbled to it that she wanted something out of me and got engaged to me for it, I don't mind telling you that I found that out some time ago, and all my people found it out long before I did. So perhaps it's not altogether unnatural that when she wanted something out of you still more, and chucked me over for it, I shouldn't worry myself much more about her; and in fact, I don't."

"I say, that's a bit thick, you know—to say she took to me for what she could get out of me."

"Is it? I'm sorry; but I thought you said it yourself."

"Well, I did say that it counted. I didn't say it was all that counted, and I don't think it is. I shouldn't care for her any more than you do, now, if I thought so. Do *you* think that's all there was to it, when she let me make love to her?"

A memory of the very early stage at which she had let him make love to her came up to anger Fred. He was not yet able to regard the whole episode of his own brief love-making with the indifference he had hitherto shown for the benefit of Jack Kirby. "I don't know why I should be expected to discuss it—with you," he said, as stiffly as his now melting condition permitted. "Whatever I think about it, it was a pretty dirty trick to make love to her in the way you

did, and it doesn't make it any better that if she'd been somebody else she wouldn't have let you do it."

"Well, I can't help feeling that myself," Jack Kirby admitted, in such a tone that Fred's irritation vanished, and he actually felt sorry for him. "And it's a pretty beastly thing to feel," he added. "She's got hold of me, the young monkey, and I'm desperately gone on her. But I wish to goodness I wasn't. She plays all sorts of tricks on me, because she knows I can't do without her, and to tell you the honest truth she gives me a devil of a time. She'd better be careful though. She isn't the only spilikin in the box, and if I found somebody that took my fancy, she might find herself left. However, I don't seem to come across anybody I'm likely to get so keen on as I am on her, and I suppose I shall go through with it. I'm damned if I'm going to stand any nonsense, though, when we're married. Well, I'm going to get shampooed. We might have a talk in the cooling room, when you've sweated it off."

Fred was not anxious for a further talk, and as the couch on which he presently recuperated himself was not within confidential talking distance of Jack Kirby's, and he wanted to go to sleep besides, the encounter brought nothing further in the way of information.

CHAPTER XXVIII

UNCLE MARK VISITS WATERMEADS

Uncle Mark paid his promised visit to Watermeads late in November. It is doubtful whether he would have paid it at all if he had not received an invitation to Elsie's wedding for a few weeks later. He explained to Fred that a function of that sort was quite beyond him, but he did not wish to appear disagreeable, and if they really wanted him he would go down for a quiet week-end beforehand. He didn't want any fuss made on his account. His servant would look after him, and he would take the liberty of sending down some wine, and a few other delicacies to which he had grown accustomed. Perhaps they could manage a sitting-room for him next to his bedroom, which should have a south aspect, if possible. He was getting too old to wish to be always in company, though he hoped to see a good deal of the family. He was sure they wouldn't mind not asking people to meet him, but he would like to make the acquaintance of the Vicar, who might be asked to dinner on Sunday evening, if convenient, or on Saturday, if more convenient still. But he had always found the clergy riper on Sunday evening, when their day's work was done.

Colonel Raine lent a carriage to fetch the great man from the station. Little accommodations of this sort would frequently have been made for the Conways, by

more than one of their neighbours, had not Sydney disliked accepting them. This occasion, however, was an exception.

The carriage picked Sydney up at Watermeads, and he drove to the station to meet the six o'clock train. It was a bitter winter night. The wind blew in great gusts, and a sleety rain drove against the windows of the carriage. But it was snug enough inside, with a footwarmer and a great fur rug.

Sydney's thoughts were sombre, as he was carried smoothly along in a way that had been familiar enough to him in the days of his spacious youth, but now seemed almost as strange as if he had been one of his own cottagers, enjoying a ride in a rich man's carriage on the way to the polling booth. The situation guided his thoughts to the poverty that had beset him for so many years, and he asked himself how far it had affected his happiness, and exactly how much he really wanted to be rich again, or at least able to live in the way in which he had been brought up.

His conclusion was that a great deal of what he had at one time missed he missed no longer. A simple way of living suited him better on the whole than a life surrounded by observances, which, however well one was served, added to responsibilities, and evoked duties which were irksome, and pleasures, many of which were irksome, too. He had enjoyed his life during the last thirty years; there was little of it he had not enjoyed. The great blot had been the anxiety as to the future, which had hardly ever been absent from his mind, and was now almost more of a burden on him than it had ever been.

It had been a great disappointment that the way of release recently held out had come to nothing. Until the hope of being able to compass life in a smaller house had raised his spirits, he had hardly realised what a burden Watermeads had become; and to take it up again, with no immediate expectation of relief, seemed intolerable.

He was greatly worried, too, over the details of Elsie's wedding. It was to be 'quiet'; that went without saying. A big wedding was so much out of the question at Watermeads that it had not even been discussed. But for a daughter of the house to be married without any ceremony whatever was equally out of the question. Clothes must be provided, friends and neighbours must be asked, and entertained; there were a hundred and one little expenses to be faced, which mounted in the aggregate to a considerable sum, and Sydney hardly knew where it was to come from. He half wished that he had accepted Mr. Blumenthal's offer for the Holbein. And yet that could not have been done without obligation, for apparently Mr. Blumenthal's offer had been far above the market price: another expert had been asked to inspect the picture, and had said that it was certainly not the work of Holbein, and its owner would be lucky if he got a hundred pounds for it at public auction.

The clouds, indeed, were gathering round Watermeads again, in spite of recent good fortune in Elsie's engagement, and in Fred's new and brilliant start in life. It seemed to be quite impossible to let the house in its present condition; and to go on living in it

meant its getting worse and worse, and themselves poorer and poorer, with no end in view but to get rid of it at last, when it would be less in value than it was now.

It was perhaps curious that Sydney should almost have made the decision to sell Watermeads at once, and get rid of all his burdens by doing so, when the last chance of saving it, which had been lately so much in his mind, should have been actually on the point of presenting itself. Surely, he had thought, Uncle Mark, having behaved so generously towards Fred, and now ready for complete reconciliation with himself, would stretch out a helping hand when he came to Watermeads and saw for himself to what a pass things had come! Perhaps it was only the reaction from his high hopes that had set in, now that they were on the very point of coming together again. And yet his doubts and depression were not altogether without cause.

For nearly thirty years his uncle, who had once treated him as a son, had given him the cold shoulder, and the temperature of that shoulder had been no higher because he had done it without showing offence against him, but only a cynical indifference. It was now nearly six months since his meeting with Fred, and his first expressed willingness to take up again the threads of relationship. But he had not moved an inch towards doing so, except with regard to Fred himself, and nothing had seemed to be further from his thoughts than to offer the substantial help which had been an accepted thing between them before the break. The nearest he had come to it was to talk to Fred about

the future in such a way as seemed to show that he had much the same ideas in his head about him as he had once had about his father. But even leaving out of account the possibility of his throwing over Fred, if he should give him some cause of displeasure, as he had thrown over Sydney, there was nothing definite to count on; Watermeads and its crying wants were still outside the pale of his generosity.

Sydney threw off his depression in some measure as he waited at the station for the train to come in. He was in some excitement at the nearness of the long deferred meeting. He had been very fond of his uncle, and some shreds of affection clung to him still. They had parted, the one as a young man, the other as a middle-aged one, but still in the prime of his active life. Sydney was now about the same age as his uncle had been then, but still felt the same sort of dependence on him, such as he had grown past feeling for any other man in the world. It mattered much to him whether his uncle would treat him as he had been used to do, or as the stranger he had made of him during the greater part of Sydney's life.

Mark Drake, amply swathed in furs, but tall and upright beyond the due of his age, seemed hardly changed to Sydney as he stepped out of his carriage, followed by Fred, and came forward to greet his nephew. "Well, Sydney, my boy," he said as he shook hands, "here's a nice night for an old fellow to be out in! I hope you've got something that will take us home to a fire pretty quick. Come on! We'll leave Gates to bring on the luggage in a fly."

Sydney experienced an extraordinary thrill of pleasure at this speech, not abundantly cordial in itself. It bridged the years. Uncle Mark was still the kindly rather selfish autocrat, and he had not the slightest objection himself to play the old part of obedience and assistance, in recognition of that careless affectionate 'Sydney, my boy,' which had not fallen on his ears for so long.

No reference whatever was made to their estrangement as they bowled along the dark country roads in the smooth-running carriage, which Uncle Mark said he much preferred to a motor-car. But he seemed to show himself completely oblivious to all that he must surely have known when he said: "You manage to keep some good horses still, then. You were always a good judge of a horse, Sydney."

"Oh, this isn't my carriage," said Sydney. "I borrowed it, as it's such a beastly night."

Uncle Mark made no comment upon this, but began to talk about Fred and his chances in West Russetshire. "I think he'll get himself in all right," he said. "Sydney, my boy, why don't you go down and speak for him? You used to be a pretty good hand at it. He's coming on himself, but he isn't up to you yet. I doubt if he ever will be. You used to be a clever fellow, Sydney. I hope the country life you chose for yourself hasn't sapped your brain."

So that was to be the note on which the past was to be treated, if it was mentioned at all; and apparently no awkwardness was to be admitted by shirking it. Sydney felt a drop in his sensations of pleasure at the meeting. He was to be held at arm's length, after

all, in spite of the surface cordiality that was to be kept up. He passed over the reference to his choice, which, as Uncle Mark knew perfectly well,—unless he had withdrawn his interest from him during the years of estrangement so far as to have forgotten all about it,—had been no choice of his. "You have made Fred a Free Trader," he said; "but I'm not at all sure that I'm one any longer, though I should like to be for the sake of our old times together. If we could get a modified Protection, it would be a great thing for people like myself."

"Ah, you've swallowed the bait, I see," said Uncle Mark, without any diminution of friendliness. "You talk it over with Fred, Sydney. He'll put you right. Still, if you're not sound, you'd better not go electioneering with him."

He changed the subject again. Sydney would have liked to talk immediate politics with him. He had done so in the past, and it had never been expected of him that he should keep his own views in the background. Uncle Mark had rather preferred that they should differ in some respects from his own, for the sake of the discussion. But now, apparently, his views were not worth considering. Uncle Mark wanted to keep friends, but not to be bothered.

The meeting between Uncle Mark and Mrs. Conway had considerably exercised the minds of those who were about to witness it. It had been agreed upon between Elsie and Rose that Uncle Mark would behave with perfect propriety, and would most probably ignore the old quarrel entirely. But they could not feel quite sure about their mother. She had talked a great deal

about Uncle Mark's visit, and had expressed herself over and over again as being ready to forgive and forget. But it was plain that she had not forgotten anything, and it was doubtful whether her forgiveness would be brought to bear upon the situation created by his visit without some expression of it, possibly awkward in its effect. She had, however, rejected all attempts to discover exactly how she intended to receive him. She hoped she knew what to say and do without prompting from her own daughters. If they could not trust her to behave as became a Christian and a gentlewoman, let them say so at once, and not take refuge in unmannerly hints. If there was one thing she abhorred it was lack of candour. As they were on the subject, however, she should like to say one thing to them. They had already heard discussed —very unfortunately as she thought, but she was tired of asking that extremely private matters should not be discussed before them; if she had asked it once she had asked it a hundred times, but no notice had been taken, and she sometimes thought that she had only to say a thing to have the opposite of it done immediately. However, that was not the point—— They had already heard discussed the possibility of Uncle's Mark's doing something to help their father in the unfortunate state to which he had been reduced, largely through the unaccountable behaviour of Uncle Mark himself. It might very well be wished that something of that sort should come about, and she should do what she could, and she hoped that they would all do what they could to make his very short visit a

pleasant one to him, so that he might see that his fears on their father's account had been entirely without foundation, that although his own countenance had been, unaccountably, withdrawn from him, he had gained the great compensation of a happy family life, and that Uncle Mark might possibly regret that he had cut himself off from it. But in order to do this it was *not* necessary that they should show how little their own mother counted in the aforesaid family life. She would not now go into the distress of mind that it frequently caused her to realise that this was so. She only wished to say that for their own sakes as well as for their father's it would be well for them to remember at least as long as Uncle Mark was with them, that their mother was still their mother, even if they chose to forget it at other times. It would be *extremely* disloyal if they allowed him to go away with the idea that he had been right after all in his unaccountable behaviour at the time of her marriage, when he had gone so far in his insensate objections to herself as a wife for their father as actually to permit himself to say that he might just as well have married his kitchenmaid, and he doubted whether he would so much have bored himself for life if he had done so.

In the adjustments that the two girls made with themselves over this speech—adjustments that were so frequently necessary when their mother wished to say just one thing to them, and said it at such length, so that filial feeling might if possible be preserved in face of self-revelations not altogether conducive to it—they did not at first understand that the great prob-

lem as to 'what Uncle Mark had said' had at last been solved for them. When they did understand it, they both laughed, rather guiltily, and then agreed that it was an awful thing to have said, and no wonder mother had been upset by it. There they left it, and agreed further that, although it was not fair to say that they had shut her off from the family life, still they must be careful not to let Uncle Mark see that they loved their father much better than they did their mother. This fact had long been acknowledged by them, and there was no disloyalty in mentioning it between themselves. They had never admitted it to anybody outside, not even to Olivia, and it was the limit to which their criticism of their mother went in their own most intimate confidences. Mrs. Conway was a good deal more fortunate than she knew in the admirable loyalty of her daughters.

They were all at the door when the carriage drove up, in spite of the icy blast that was driving against the house, fortunately obliquely to the south front; for there was no porch, and the great hall, which made such an agreeable place of resort in the summer, was almost unusable in the winter, except when it was shuttered and curtained for the night. The majesty of Mrs. Conway's greeting was somewhat spoiled by the necessity of hurrying Uncle Mark into the house at a run, and immediately banging the door behind him. He came, as it were, full tilt upon her, but as she recoiled she said: "Welcome to Watermeads! Though we have not seen you for so many years there is still a warm place for you here."

She held out her hand, and Uncle Mark took it, and

replied with a laugh: "I shall be very glad to find it then, for I'm nearly frozen."

The anticipated awkwardness of the meeting was over. Mrs. Conway stood aside, apparantly ruminating upon whether her speech had made quite the effect she desired, while Uncle Mark shook hands with Elsie and Rose and Bobby and Billy and Penelope, and then, divesting himself of his heavy coat with Fred's help, wondered how long Gates would be following with the luggage.

He was led into the parlour, which was warm and cozy enough with its bright fire and close-curtained windows, and then he smiled upon Elsie and said: "Well, my dear, so you're going to get married! I hope the lucky young man is going to be shown to me. He'll have to be something quite special if I'm to be pleased with him."

The look he gave her was very kind, and he turned it upon Rose, too, and smiled at her. The two girls, at least, it was plain, had found favour in his eyes. He handled the close-cropped polls of Bobby and Billy, and said that Fred had told him they were good cricketers already; and he put his hand on Penelope's shoulder, and said she was like her mother. In the shortest possible time he had shown that he meant to be friendly with the family, but Mrs. Conway had not time even to breathe hard once at having had no further notice taken of her since her speech of welcome before he turned to her and said: "Well, my dear lady, I think you did well to choose a country life for yourself and your family. You look hardly older than when I last saw you; nor does Sydney, now I come to

look at him; and as for the young people, the sight of them makes me want to end my own days in the country."

Mrs. Conway swallowed it. She had put on at least six stone in weight since Uncle Mark had last seen her; her hair was grey, and the large bones of her face had lost the softening disguise of youthful flesh. But she swallowed it, and a bland smile overspread her features. "I think I may say the same about you, Uncle Mark," she replied, with ponderous graciousness. "To see you looking so much the same makes me feel a girl again."

All her resentment had been killed in a moment. She felt friendly and at ease, and but for the hurried outbreak of talk from her husband which immediately followed her speech she would have engaged Uncle Mark in intimate conversation there and then, and expected the rest of the family to stand by and listen to her.

She saw her way clear now. It would be easy, in face of the friendliness he was evidently anxious to show, to have a pleasant confidential talk with him which would put everything right. This would be far better than ignoring the past altogether. She would take him to task, gently and affectionately, for the absurdities of his behaviour thirty years before, but without showing the slightest trace of ill-feeling about it. He would be led to see that it was he and not they who had suffered most from the long estrangement; but she would show him how entirely ready *she* was to forgive and forget, and the end would be a cementing of the new alliance between them, in which Uncle Mark

would receive more from the loving care and attention of a good woman than he could return, however substantial the benefits might be with which he would be eager to repay them.

It was rather irritating, then, that, until the time half an hour later when Uncle Mark was ensconced in the rooms that had been prepared for him, she should hardly have been able to get in a word edgeways with him. It was not only her daughters, whom she had warned against this very behaviour, who took up more of his attention than could have been wished for; but Sydney and Fred constantly cut in in front of her when she was on the point of speech—it hardly ever went further than that—and who actually, both of them, tried to dissuade her from accompanying Uncle Mark upstairs, to see that everything was as he wished there. That, however, she 'would not have.' If reduced, by the attitude of those who should have acted so differently, to a conversational cipher, she would at least not be dislodged from her place as mistress of the house, and solicitous hostess. She attended herself to the fires, which needed no attention, in both rooms, pointed out to Gates the wardrobe and the chest of drawers, into which he was already putting his master's clothes, satisfied herself as to the temperature of the hot-water jug standing in the basin, showed Uncle Mark where she had put writing-paper, envelopes, penholders, nibs, blotting-paper, ink—on the writing table—slightly shifted the position of an easy chair, and put a footstool in front of it, and showed in every way that she could hardly do enough for the welfare of her

guest, before she was led away, almost forcibly, by her husband.

She made no expostulations. She was accustomed to this treatment, she told herself, and it was her duty to put up with it without complaint. Her time with Uncle Mark would come on the morrow.

CHAPTER XXIX

UNCLE MARK LEAVES WATERMEADS

"My dear Sydney, I think you have the most charming family that I have ever come across. I wish very much that I had known them earlier, especially those two dear girls of yours. Why you have kept them buried here for so long I don't know, but at least it has done them no harm."

Sydney was getting rather tired of this note, which had been repeated more often that it might have been thought likely that a man of Uncle Mark's ready tact would have found necessary.

"I'm glad you like them," he said. "They *are* dear girls, and they're the same all through. As for keeping them here, I don't know that they have been buried any more than other girls in country houses, and if they have it hasn't been my fault. I haven't had the money to let them go about."

They were in Uncle Mark's sitting-room on Sunday morning. He had breakfasted, and was sitting in an easy chair by the window, through which the winter sunshine was streaming gratefully. He had announced his intention of walking to church later on, as it was so fine, and had asked that Sydney should come and talk to him beforehand.

"Well, now, I want to have a little talk with you about money," he said. "I've undertaken to see Fred

through, you know, and if he goes on as well as he has begun he ought to do very well. But as we have made friends again after all these years you must give me the pleasure of letting me do something for you, Sydney. I'm afraid you have been having rather a hard time in this great barrack of a house, though your children haven't suffered, I'm glad to see."

Sydney repented of his momentary annoyance, and thanked him for his kindness, but almost inaudibly. The revulsion of feeling was too much for him. The help that he had begun to fear would not be held out to him was now being offered, in the careless but generous fashion that he knew so well of old. He could not convince himself that Uncle Mark had treated him well, but if he was now ready to amend his treatment all the past would be wiped out. They would be towards one another what they had been thirty years before.

Uncle Mark went on. "I want your little Elsie to have a *pukka* wedding," he said. "If it's possible at this time of day to give her something more elaborate in the way of clothes than you've been able to manage, I should like that for her. I shall give her a present myself, naturally, but what I want to give you, Sydney, is for what you'll have to do for her, to get married in the way she ought to be. You'll do entirely what you like with it, of course; but that was in my mind when I wrote the cheque, and hoped you wouldn't mind accepting it for the sake of old times."

The cheque he held out was for five hundred pounds, which was munificent for the purpose indicated, but so inadequate for any other purpose that Sydney had

thought him prepared to consider that the blow to his hopes was almost overwhelming. It was not quite so, because, with the necessity he had for so long experienced of taking each difficulty as it came, and shutting his eyes to the one that should come after, the relief at having this one about Elsie's wedding so satisfactorily solved was great. Also, the possibility of larger adjustments was not entirely barred, though from his manner of speaking Uncle Mark did not appear to have them in his mind.

The time, however, for their discussion could not be now, as Sydney had hoped it might be when summoned to his uncle's presence. The handsome present was in the nature of a blocking motion, which made it impossible to bring the larger question forward until a new opportunity should arise, and Sydney, grateful for the temporary assistance given him, but with a sinking feeling at heart, prepared to follow him in amiable conversation about anything but the cloud that was gathering over Watermeads. For Uncle Mark had waved his thanks aside in his own large manner, and had embarked at once upon a flood of the idle but amusing chatter which had made him always such an agreeable companion.

He was delightfully talkative and friendly to Elsie and Rose as he walked between them to church. He confessed that he did not often go to church in London, but in the country he rarely missed a Sunday. "It's the only thing left," he said, "that really brings us all together, those at the top and those at the bottom. At least it ought to, and if I stop away I'm not doing my duty by the opinions I hold. Besides, I

like the feeling of something still going on that has gone on for centuries. You know, when Mr. Gladstone went to stay in Oxford towards the end of his life he did nothing but deplore the changes that he saw there; so if a great respect for the past isn't proper for an advanced Radical like myself—but of course it is—I'm in good company. Oh, yes, an old country church is one of the best things left to us; and when it has a parson like that perfectly delightful Vicar of yours——! I don't know that I've ever met a country parson I liked better."

"He's a darling," said Elsie. "And didn't you like Olivia, Uncle Mark?"

"My dear! If I were fifty years younger—or say forty—yes, I should have nourished hope forty years ago——! But what can Fred have been thinking about all this time? I'm not going to waste my time over Fred now; I can have him to myself when I can't have you—but I shall ask Fred a serious question when I do talk to him again. If I had seen Olivia when Fräulein Blumenthal was brought to me for inspection, I shouldn't have made the mistake of thinking *she* would do. We haven't mentioned Fräulein Blumenthal before. I won't ask any questions about her. I take it that you saw through her, in a way that we blind men can't. We are all taken by a pretty face, you know, even the oldest of us. But to do us justice we get over it when we find there's nothing else. Fred has got over it. In fact, I think his recovery has been a wonderfully quick affair, considering how badly he was hit, poor fellow! I don't want him to marry yet, but if he *must* marry, as most men do, I think

he had better not wait too long, considering that—— Well, I mustn't say too much, but *that* would give me infinite pleasure."

Here was something for Elsie and Rose to think over. That Fred had completely recovered they now knew, and were very glad of it, though they were a little surprised, too. For when he had last been at Watermeads, five or six weeks before, he had not completely recovered, and the plan which both of them had formed, directly his engagement to Freda had been broken off, of encouraging him to fall in love with Olivia, had seemed unlikely of fulfilment.

And yet Fred had seemed, even in his then state of comparative melancholy, to take more pleasure in Olivia's society than he had taken at any time since her return. He had 'made it up with her' over the way in which he had received her warning about Freda. She had told them that he had been 'perfectly sweet' about it, but she had not shown on her side any anxiety to 'catch a heart on the rebound,' as they had hoped, from experience drawn from the course of love in novels, might come about. It seemed unlikely, to judge by the same experience, that she would have spoken to them about Fred in the frank affectionate way which she always used, without a flicker of the eyelids or the slightest change of colour, if she had been in love with him. But she was undoubtedly fond of him, and he of her. Their close friendship *might* blossom into love, although there were no signs of the blossoming at present.

But here was Uncle Mark, whose every word had a quality of omnipotence about it in his present relation-

ship to the family, taking the same view as they did about Olivia, and the extreme advisability of Fred's marrying her. It was rather exciting, for it removed, at least, all danger of his quarrelling with Fred on the same subject as he had quarrelled with his father about, if Fred *should* fall in love with Olivia; and, more than that, a word from him might very well light the spark that was presumably now ripe for ignition in Fred's heart.

What a dear Uncle Mark was, showing himself so interested not only in the material welfare of the family, but in their most private and youthful affairs! He had had them all up into his room between breakfast and church time, and made them the most magnificent presents—laughing and joking the whole time, and refusing to listen to a word of thanks. Elsie a hundred pounds for a wedding present, Rose twenty 'for a frock or a little bit of jewelry,' Bobby and Billy a fiver each, to do what they liked with 'except to put in the savings bank,' Penelope a golden sovereign—there was trouble about the discrepancy later, and Bobby and Billy each gave her ten shillings on the quiet, and to keep *her* quiet. The way he had given his presents had been such fun, and had quite put into the shade Cousin Henry's former benevolences. He seemed to be made of money, and to be willing to bestow it wherever it was wanted. When the news of his thoughtful and splendid present for Elsie's wedding came out, of which he refused to hear a word further, it was felt that there was nothing he could not do, or would not do, to make life smile at Watermeads. He had more than justified the expectations aroused by

his visit. But it still remained something of a puzzle how he could have let so many years go by without taking any notice of them, since he so liked young people, and was so wonderful in understanding them.

But there was one member of the family whom the golden stream left untouched. Uncle Mark made no tangible present to Mrs. Conway, and although he was abundantly polite whenever necessity demanded that he should be in close proximity to her, he showed a surprising agility in avoiding it at other times, and seemed anxious to keep as many of the family around him, as a sort of bodyguard, as were available for the purpose. He also steadily refused to listen to any speech of hers beyond its second, or at most its third sentence, breaking in upon it with a quick use of his own wit, and a courteous smile that divested the interruption of all offence, but had the practical effect of keeping her out of the circle of talk. For when he had thus taken the ball out of her hands he always returned it to one of the others, and left her ruminating upon another opening, which, when it came, was as promptly closed to her as the one before.

It was all so dexterously done, however, that Mrs. Conway, while her annoyance began to burn against her daughters, who were behaving in exactly the way she had warned them against, had no suspicion that Uncle Mark was seeking to avoid her, conversationally or in any other way. She liked him immensely, chiefly because he seemed to like her so much. She even hugged to herself a sense of her own brilliance in conversation, because whatever she did begin to say was so immediately understood and so cleverly interpreted

that it gave her quite the air of being clever and understanding herself. In spite of the unaccountable way in which the two girls had ignored her warning, and drawn to themselves attentions which it was plain enough that Uncle Mark would have paid to her, if he had been left to himself, she could see how he was feeling about the disastrous mistake he had made thirty years before. He showed in every look and action that he acknowledged how wrong he had been in his judgment of her. But she wanted him to say so. If only she could get him to herself for half an hour, she was sure he *would* say it in his own charming fashion; and then would be her chance of showing on her side how entirely she had forgiven and forgotten.

When it at last dawned upon her that, unless she took steps to create the opportunity, Uncle Mark might leave the house on the next day without her having had a word alone with him, she told him, in the presence of the family, that she wished to have a little private talk. They had been sitting over the tea-table in the parlour, and Uncle Mark had just announced his intention of going upstairs to write a few letters.

He rose from his chair upon her word. "That will be delightful," he said, beaming upon her. "Give me half an hour for my letters, and then you and Sydney come up for a little chat. After that we'll come down again and amuse ourselves all together until dinner time."

He almost skipped out of the room, and had shut the door behind him before anything further could be said.

Sydney laughed. "What is our little private talk to be about, mother?" he asked. "I don't think he wants one, you know. If he did he'd have said so. He and I had our little private talk together this morning."

"Quite so," said Mrs. Conway severely, "and every other member of the family, too, except myself. I should like to ask, pray, if there is a conspiracy between you all to keep me entirely shut out from the intercourse that you yourself, Sydney, and all my own children from the eldest to the youngest, find so agreeable. It seems to me quite unaccountable, the way in which, the moment I open my mouth to speak, one or another of you breaks in and takes the very words out of my lips. Uncle Mark pays me the most courteous attention, but he is hardly allowed to address himself to me at all. It seems to me that you have all forgotten yourselves completely, and I have really begun to wonder——"

"Oh, I don't think there has been anything wrong, mother," said Sydney. "Uncle Mark evidently likes to amuse himself with the youngsters, and we old people must stand aside a bit. But you and I can have a little chat with him presently. We'll go up at half past six."

He looked at his watch and was moving away, but Mrs. Conway arrested him. "I shall be glad if you will kindly listen to what I have to say, Sydney," she said. "It is extremely distasteful to me to speak before the children, but it is just an instance of the unaccountable treatment I complain of that when I propose a quiet little talk with Uncle Mark, you should

immediately consider it necessary to take part in it yourself. I suppose I am not to be trusted alone with him. Pray, what do you think I have to say to him, that you must be there to listen, like a policeman, and, if I am to judge by what has gone on ever since he came into the house, probably to prevent my saying anything to him at all?"

"Oh, come now, mother! It was Uncle Mark himself who invited me to join your little confabulation. Why should you object?"

"I shouldn't talk to him about anything that the whole family can't join in, if I were you, mother," said Fred. "I know his little ways pretty well by this time, and it's quite obvious that he doesn't want it."

"Bobby and Billy and Penelope, leave the room," said Mrs. Conway.

The three children obeyed, and Elsie and Rose would have followed them, but their mother ordered them to remain where they were, unless they had lost *all* sense of respect and obedience.

"Look here, mother," said Sydney. "I don't think you quite understand the situation, or Uncle Mark, either. I didn't want to say anything until after he had gone, but perhaps I had better say it now, though I don't want it to make any difference in our treatment of him, and of course it won't. He likes all the children, and has been extraordinarily kind and generous to them. No doubt he'll go on being so, and I think he'll stick to Fred, and may do all sorts of big things for him by and by. But you and me—we're back numbers, and he has no more idea of taking us into his favour and helping us through our difficulties—at least,

the big ones—than he has had at any time these last thirty years. I've come to see that quite plainly, knowing him as I do. I shan't talk to him at all about the big difficulties; he wouldn't let me if I wanted to. I think you must make up your mind to keep silence, too. He won't listen to you any more than he will to me. Let's be grateful to him for what he is doing for Fred, and take him here as he wants to be taken. There's nothing more to be expected from him."

Mrs. Conway made a gesture with her hands, and emitted a sound expressive of impatience. "Really, Sydney," she expostulated, "for a man of supposed ability, you take the most absurd and wrong-headed views that it is possible to imagine. You make me wonder sometimes if your brain is not giving way. Nobody who has observed Uncle Mark during his visit here could possibly doubt—unless they are determined to shut their eyes to all facts—that he has been brought to see the enormity of his mistake in the past, and that he is determined by all means in his power to put it right. As to his affording pecuniary relief in the difficulties to which you refer, it may perhaps surprise you to hear that nothing has been farther from my mind than to touch upon such matters with him, and I must say that I am surprised and pained to find that, when he has already done so much, and has shown himself so extraordinarily generous, you should be able to think of him in no connection but that. It is *not* the right spirit in which to regard an affectionate relative, restored to us after years of estrangement and misunderstanding. Personally I would rather eat bread and water for the rest of my days

than show myself so lacking in nice feeling. But I suppose that nothing *I* can say or do will——"

"Well, we'll have our chat with Uncle Mark in half an hour, mother," said Sydney, preparing to leave the room. "As long as it isn't money you want to talk about, I don't mind."

Uncle Mark departed next morning with Fred, leaving behind him some very agreeable memories. Mrs. Conway had not been able to make an opportunity of assuring him of her forgiveness for the past, but was convinced that she had only been prevented from doing so by the mischievous interference of her husband and children. Uncle Mark had been cordial towards her to the end, and she thought that when he wrote to her thanking her for her hospitality, as of course he would do, she might reply, and unload herself of some of the many things she had wished to say to him. But he wrote to Sydney instead, and only sent her a message—a warm one, it is true, but one that gave no opening for a return letter from her. She was thwarted to the last, but looked forward to many future visits from Uncle Mark, and a complete understanding between them, both as regarded the past and the future.

Sydney was under no illusions as to future visits. He knew that Uncle Mark had no intention of coming again, and that the breach between them would remain as it had been, except that an interest in the two girls, and possibly in the two younger boys, would be added to his interest in Fred.

He knew very well why. There had been indications of the stirring of old affections towards himself, which

might have led to a revival of their close relationship; but they had come to nothing. Uncle Mark had broken with him years before because of the wife he had chosen for himself; and the cause of offence still remained.

CHAPTER XXX

AT ELSIE'S WEDDING

THANKS to Uncle Mark's handsome present, Elsie was married from Watermeads in a way that would not have disgraced the house in its former affluent days. Country neighbours were entertained to an old-fashioned breakfast, which lacked nothing in profusion or decoration. The library, which was the least out of repair of the great reception rooms, was made fit for use, and in it were displayed a collection of wedding-presents which in number and quality testified to the popularity of both bride and bridegroom. Elsie's trousseau, also, earned the admiration of her girl friends. A round sum from Uncle Mark's present had gone to supplementing the somewhat meagre one that had first been allocated to it.

It would not have been possible to entertain numerous guests from a distance without putting a great many more rooms into repair; but the Conways' circle of friends was now almost entirely confined to those who lived near them. Sydney had no relations with whom he was intimate, and Mrs. Conway was in a like case, except for Cousin Henry and his family. But Cousin Henry, his wife and his eldest daughter, who was to be a bridesmaid, were invited to stay at Watermeads from the day before the wedding until the day after. They were the only guests who slept in the house. Edward's relations were much more numerous, and, it must be confessed, more ornamental. A

large party of them assembled at Lutterbourne Rectory, and others enjoyed the hospitality of Lady Sophia Raine, who showed great interest in the affair from beginning to end.

Some awkwardness had been anticipated over the meeting of Fred and Cousin Henry, for they had not parted the best of friends. Indeed, it was considered doubtful if Cousin Henry would accept the invitation held out to him. But he did so without demur, and showed no animus whatever against Fred when they met. In fact, he seemed to have entirely reverted to the ponderous but placid Cousin Henry of his former visit, and Elsie and Rose had some difficulty in identifying him with the ogre he had made of himself as Fred's employer. His wife and daughter were not more interesting than before, but behaved themselves with more amiability as guests than they had done as boarders. Mrs. Wilkins even allowed Mrs. Conway to patronise her, and her daughter, who was now seventeen and quite pretty, seemed anxious to make friends with her girl cousins, and at least justified her inclusion with Rose, Penelope, Olivia and two sisters of Edward's in the train of bridesmaids.

It was to Mrs. Conway that Cousin Henry unburdened himself of certain matters that had exercised him, during a confidential talk on the evening of his arrival. These two got on very well together. Cousin Henry thought his hostess an amiable and sensible woman, in contradistinction to the views that his wife held about her, and she was inclined to act as his backer, and to show all and sundry that she at least thought her own relations as good as anybody else's.

It seemed that Cousin Henry had formed matrimonial projects for Fred and one of his daughters, and had been greatly disappointed when Fred had become engaged to Freda Blumenthal. He had never meant his dismissal of him to be taken seriously, and wondered now whether something couldn't be fixed up, as the other affair had come to nothing. Anybody who married one of his daughters would find himself in possession of a tidy sum with her; and they would all get a good deal more after his death than people might think from the quiet way in which it suited him to live.

Mrs. Conway received the proposal politely, and with a great many words, the total effect of which was that under present circumstances it was hardly good enough. Cousin Henry accepted her opinion without resentment, but in some dejection. He said he supposed that now Fred had been taken up by his grand relation and was going to be a Member of Parliament and all, he'd have a right to look higher. Well, it had only been an idea of his, and Mrs. Conway needn't let it go further; but he would say this, that if things had turned out as he had had in his mind, Fred might easily have touched the three thousand a year mark before he was thirty, and a good deal more than doubled it by and by, to say nothing of what his wife would have had. He thought he should like this to be known now, as it had all come to nothing; and it might be remembered also that he had come forward with his offer at a time when the gentleman who had since taken everything in hand hadn't lifted a little finger to do anything at all.

Mrs. Conway, then waxing confidential, told him that Uncle Mark had not entirely fulfilled the expectations aroused by the revival of relations with them. What he would do for Fred by and by remained to be seen. She was far from wishing for his death; such anticipations, which were far too common amongst people with rich relations, were abhorrent to her; but when a man was nearing eighty it was to be supposed that he would die at some time or other, and when Uncle Mark did die, the probability was that he would leave Fred all his money. Sydney had said that there was not the slightest chance of his leaving *him* anything substantial, and had said it so strongly—almost with violence—that she could only suppose Uncle Mark had told him so himself, although he would not admit this to be the case. She would not go into the reasons for this unaccountable decision—preferring a son before his parents—but there were certain persons who would not be guided in their treatment of others, or in the management of their own affairs, and Cousin Henry could see for himself that Sydney, against whom she did not wish to breathe a word of criticism, was one of them. As she was speaking to a relation, and in the closest confidence, she would say that Sydney had made a mess of things in dealing with Uncle Mark, and the result was that here they were with this great house on their hands, and a property that hardly supported itself, and no prospect as far as she could see, of anything but ruin in two or three years' time at the most.

Cousin Henry may have thought that this was a hint to him to come to the rescue, which, to do Mrs. Conway

justice, it was not, all she wanted being a ready listener. He said perfunctorily that he hoped it wasn't as bad as that, and went on rather hurriedly to the affair of Fred's engagement to Freda, and Freda's subsequent engagement to Jack Kirby. This, he said, was causing great excitement in Hillstead, and the airs that Blumenthal gave himself over his daughter marrying the only son of a lord were something beyond belief. "They do say though," he said, "that the young man is trying to get out of it. They say the wedding has been put off once—I don't know whether it's true or not—and no date is fixed for it yet, though with pots of money on both sides there's no reason why they shouldn't have been married long ago.

"Of course the money would have been a great help here," concluded Cousin Henry; "but the Blumenthals are nobodies, and as the Honourable Kirby doesn't have to consider money with the girl he marries, it's not to be wondered at if he gives her the go by after all."

Mrs. Conway let it be known that, if the Blumenthals were nobodies, the Kirbys were hardly more, in the estimation of their neighbours. "Personally," she said, "I would prefer to have nothing whatever to do with such people. Lord Kirby is quite a self-made man, and the fact that he has been raised to the peerage counts for nothing in these days. Why, Mr. Blumenthal could be raised to the peerage if he paid enough money, and I wonder that has not occurred to him, as he seems to think so much of that sort of thing. However, Sydney likes Lord Kirby, and he and his wife have been invited here to-

morrow. As for the son, nothing would induce me to have him in the house, and if that horrible cunning *disgusting* girl does marry him, and comes to live at Prittlewell, I shall cut her; and if you ever have the opportunity of telling her so, Henry, I shall be obliged if you will do so."

Cousin Henry said that he hardly knew the Blumenthals himself—that sort of person wasn't much in his line—and owing to her behaviour to Fred neither he nor his family now took any notice of Miss Blumenthal. But if Lord Kirby would like to hear what was thought of the affair, and of the Blumenthals generally, by the more respectable inhabitants of Hillstead, and Mrs. Conway would introduce them, he would have great pleasure in telling him.

The introduction was made on the following day when the guests were assembled in the library after the ceremony in church, and before the wedding breakfast. It was very long since any room at Watermeads had been thus full of a well-dressed cheerful crowd, most of them in the best of humours with themselves and one another, and creating a very babel of noise; but Lord Kirby and Cousin Henry found a corner apart and had an agreeable conversation together.

Lord Kirby was beaming with good nature, and was a very different man from the unhappy one who had recently taken such cold comfort from a visit to Watermeads. He was only too pleased to make the reason of his cheerfulness known to Cousin Henry, when he heard that he was indirectly interested.

"I'm glad to be able to tell you, sir, that we've got out of it," he said. "I've no wish to say a word

against the young woman, now the danger's past, and she's welcome to as good a husband as she can get by her way of going to work about it. But my boy ought to have seen what she was up to from the suddenness with which she threw over our young friend here—as nice a young fellow as I ever wish to meet, and well out of such a marriage, I say. Well, he did see it, I'm happy to say, when she began to make eyes at a friend of his staying in my house. I won't mention his name, but he's the eldest son of an earl of an old creation, and I suppose she thought, if she could catch him, that would be better than marrying the heir to a new barony. So I dare say it would have been, from her way of looking at things, but the young man wasn't taking any, and went and told Jack all about it. Well, I'm glad to say that Jack came to me. If he'd gone straight to her she might have worked round him, for she's as cunning as the devil. But I took a strong line. I said, 'Look here, my boy, that's not the sort of young woman you want to marry. She'll have pots of money, but you don't want pots of money with the girl you marry; you want something else, and she hasn't got it. Pull yourself together and throw her over, as she threw young Conway over,' I said. 'He's got over it all right, and you'll get over it, and precious glad to be rid of such a girl in a few months' time.' Well, he took my advice. He didn't like doing it, because the young minx had got a hold over him, and I suppose she reckoned on that, and thought that if her third try failed she could fall back on her second. However, she'll find herself left now, with everything to begin over again,

and no great chance, I should say, of getting hold of anybody who would have suited her book as well as Jack. He wrote her a letter, and went straight off to Canada—the day before yesterday. He's going to shoot moose, or caribou, or something of that sort. I don't care what he shoots, as long as he comes back cured from his infatuation for that young party."

Cousin Henry expressed deep interest in this recital, and felt it. It would be a tit-bit with which to regale his wife by and by, and afterwards his friends at Hillstead. He asked Lord Kirby how the Blumenthals had taken it.

"Oh, as you might expect," said Lord Kirby, with a laugh. "They're going to bring an action for breach, and ask for unheard of damages. But, bless you, they won't bring any action. They don't want the money, and it will queer the girl's chances for ever, if it's brought out in court the way she's behaved. Everybody will be laughing at her. They wouldn't think of facing it. No, Miss Freda will have to swallow it, and begin all over again, as I said. Serve her right, too! Fancy not being content when she'd caught my son!"

There then was the end of Freda's connection with Watermeads, and of the disagreeable possibility of her settling down as a neighbour within a few miles. To no-one did Lord Kirby's news, as passed on by Cousin Henry, bring greater relief than to Mrs. Conway, who, however, stated that she had foreseen it all along, and gave Cousin Henry to understand that, in some way which she did not explain, she herself had been responsible for bringing it about. The rest of

the family said very little about it, except Penelope, who cried, when a Bowdlerised version of the episode was put before her, and said that when she grew up she should ask Freda to live with her.

One of the most gratifying products of Elsie's wedding was the pleasure shown in it by Edward's parents. Sydney had from the first been a little doubtful as to the way in which they would take it. Sir Vivian Probert had no more reason to wish his son to marry a girl with money than Lord Kirby, but the poverty of the Conways had reached such a pitch that in the eyes of a man so rich as Edward's father it might possibly have outweighed the effect of their respectably ancient birth. It would have been galling, at least, to have to entertain the Proberts to the kind of wedding which was all that could have been afforded Elsie but for Uncle Mark's present.

Elsie had stayed with them in Norfolk, and they had taken greatly to her. And Lady Probert had stayed with Edward at Lutterbourne Rectory, and helped in the elaborate furnishing which the house was undergoing; but she had not come over to Watermeads. No difficulties whatever had been made about money by Sir Vivian's lawyers, and the settlements upon Elsie, which Sydney had left entirely to the other side, had been handsome. Nevertheless, there had been a sensation of doubt in Sydney's mind. They had accepted Elsie as a daughter-in-law, but he dreaded that in some way or other they might show themselves not best pleased with the necessity. Left to live his life in the way that suited him, Sydney cared little for outside opinion, and wore his poverty gracefully. It was

only when brought into contact with unavoidable comparisons that he showed himself thin-skinned and nervous.

But everything went well. Sir Vivian Probert was a gentle-mannered courteous man who looked older than his years. He was rather deaf, and was apt to keep silence when conversation was general. But he was an agreeable companion to those whom he liked, and he liked Sydney from the first, and Sydney liked him. He took the earliest opportunity of expressing his pleasure at Edward's marriage with Elsie, and did it in such a way that all Sydney's fears were swept away; for he felt that his girl was received as she deserved to be, and the poverty of her parents did not weigh a single grain against what she was in herself. Edward's young sisters showed themselves devoted to her, and Lady Probert hardly less so.

Lady Probert was a handsome woman, with quiet and distinguished manners. With regard to her, there was probably some reason for the kind of doubt with which Sydney had been troubled. She was as nice as possible to him, but towards Mrs. Conway she held herself somewhat stiffly. That lady put on her most majestic air of dignity in conversation with her, but they spoke to one another very little, and seemed mutually pleased to keep apart. If Edward had warned her that his bride's mother was not quite so charming as the rest of the family, that might have accounted for her having stayed for a week at Lutterbourne without coming over to Watermeads, and also for the absence of warmth which she now showed towards her. These speculations crossed Sydney's mind, and were

dismissed from it. They were not of the sort that could be pursued with any advantage.

Sir Vivian showed himself greatly interested in Watermeads. Sydney took him and his wife over some of the rooms of the house. Lady Probert told him that her husband could never see any house without wanting to live in it, and that their own house was always being altered in little ways, though it had come to them so perfect that it was difficult to improve it. She smiled affectionately at her husband, who seemed to be lost in a dream of speculation, as he looked round the splendid rooms which only wanted money expended on them to make them something quite exceptional. She knew what he was thinking of. It would have given him more pleasure to have such a house as Watermeads to deal with than to contemplate his own beautiful Elizabethan Hall, where there was nothing left to do, and life was a little dull for a man with such tastes as his.

He and Sydney went round the gardens after breakfast. "This is just the sort of thing I should like to develop," said Sir Vivian. "It has infinite possibilities, and one could go on for ever, and never spoil the particular charm it has at present. My garden is all formal—very fine of its sort, but there's nothing more to be done with it; and the ground all round it is as flat as a pancake."

"If you'd like to rent the place," said Sydney with a smile, "you can have it for the keeping up. I can't afford to do anything here."

"I'll think about that," said Sir Vivian, in all seriousness.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE RETURN OF GILES

Giles Bellamy had not returned to Watermeads in the summer, nor had he been there since. He had accepted the invitation to Elsie's wedding, but had afterwards written to say that he should not be able to come, as his father was ill. He had written once to Sydney before this, and that was all that had been heard of him.

Sydney had been rather distressed about him. After their talk together at Sandford Hole, he had at least expected him to pay court to Rose. He had said that he loved her, and Sydney had let him know that his suit would be welcome. And now it was five months since he had left them. Had he drawn back, or what was the reason for his long silence?

His first letter, written a week or two after he had returned home, had said that his father wanted him at home, and he did not know when he should be able to leave. There was a great deal of business to be done. Then the weeks had passed, and nothing further had been heard from him.

His brother had left a little boy. Sydney had learnt that from Lady Sophia, to whom it came natural to acquire such details of information. So Giles had not become an eldest son by his brother's death, and his eligibility was no more marked than before.

After a time Sydney began to think that it was just as well that nothing had come of his fancy for Rose, which did not seem as strong as he had thought it himself, since he had let all these months go by without coming near her, or even caring to have word of her. Sydney would have welcomed Giles as a son-in-law, but he was no great matrimonial catch, and Rose was very young still. With Elsie gone, Rose counted for more than before at Watermeads. Her father didn't want her to marry anybody at present.

But soon after the new year, Bellamy made his appearance at Watermeads, from the same rooms as he had occupied before. He arrived at tea-time, and was given a welcome that ought to have pleased him. Even Mrs. Conway expressed pleasure at his reappearance, and rallied him heavily about not having let them know what he was doing, or when he was coming back.

He was not much more communicative about himself than before, but explained shortly that he had been very busy with his father over estate work and other family matters. His father was not in good health, and wanted him with him. He should be living at home for the greater part of the year; he was going to pack up the things from his rooms in the village, and would return home in a week's time.

Sydney walked back with him to his rooms later on. There seemed to be a good deal more to be said, and there was nowhere at Watermeads to say it in private, for all the family congregated in the parlour in the winter time, and privacy was a difficult matter to accomplish.

Nothing was said between the two men for some

time as they walked together down the drive in the winter darkness, faintly lit by stars in a clear sky. Sydney felt some slight annoyance with his companion. If he had come, after all these months, expecting to be received on the same terms as those on which he had left, it was surely his part to say so. It was not for Sydney to ask for explanations, though he wanted to hear them.

Presently Giles did speak, and without any preliminary beating of the conversational bush. "I've come down here purposely to ask Rose to marry me," he said, "if you still give me your permission."

"Oh, have you?" said Sydney drily. "I thought you'd forgotten all about her."

"Did it look like that?" replied Giles at once, without taking any notice of the stiffness of his manner. "No, I wasn't likely to forget her. But things have changed for me a good deal at home. My father felt my brother's death very keenly. He never seemed to care for me much as long as Geoffrey was alive; but that's all changed now. He can't do without me. He was always waiting for Geoffrey to go and settle down there and look after things with him, and now Geoffrey's dead I've got to do it. In fact, as long as he's alive I've got to drop the artist and live and behave as a country gentleman; perhaps I ought to say as an estate agent, for it's my father I shall have to look after the place for now, and when he dies it will be my nephew."

He seemed to have said all he had to say for the present. "Well," said Sydney, after a pause of reflection, "then what about Rose?"

"I told my father that I wanted to get married. I said that if I settled down at home I must have a house of my own and an income. It is that that has kept me so long away."

"You mean he didn't see it."

"He was prepared to give me an income, but he wanted me to live at home with him and my mother, and the child. But he has given way now. I'm to have my house—it's a very pretty one—and a thousand a year—if I marry. If I don't, I shall live with them at the big house. It's all agreed upon now; and that's what I have to offer Rose."

"Well, I've no objection to your offering it to her," said Sydney, after another pause. He was unable to say it with any warmth. He liked Giles, though his reserve and matter-of-factness were not the qualities that made him like him, and they were all that were apparent just at the moment. But what he had to offer with himself was nothing very brilliant for a girl as beautiful as Rose, and Sydney remembered that so far it had been he only who had encouraged Giles to hope for Rose, and was rather sorry that he had done so, now that the danger of her marrying someone whom he disliked was quite of the past.

"I'll make her happy if she'll have me," said Giles.

Sydney was touched by something in his voice. "Oh, my dear fellow, I'm sure you will." Then he laughed and threw off his restraint. "The fact is," he said, "that one has been rather spoilt by Elsie's marriage. Still, one has no right to expect that for both one's daughters. Try your luck, Giles. I don't know whether she'll have you or not. She likes you—

we all do—but I've seen no signs of anything else. I shall say nothing to anybody until you come and tell me something further."

Giles tried his luck the next day. He and Sydney went for a long walk in the morning, with Rose and Olivia. Giles and Rose gradually dropped behind. Sydney remembered his undertaking of the night before, but did not consider it so binding on him that he need refrain from saying to Olivia with a smile: "Do you think anything very serious is going on between those two behind?"

Olivia looked at him with startled surprise. "What, have *you* seen it then?" she asked.

It was Sydney's turn to show surprise. "Seen what?" he asked.

Olivia hesitated, and turned her eyes away from him. "Oh, nothing," she said. "I thought from what you said——"

She broke off. "Tell me what you mean," he said. "What *I* meant was that—oh, I don't see why I shouldn't say it, though I said I wasn't going to—Giles wants to marry Rose, and I wondered whether he was telling her so."

A blush crept over her cheeks as she looked at him again. "Are you quite sure of that?" she asked.

"Yes, I am. He told me so. Come now, Olivia, what's your little secret? Is it that she wants him to tell her so? You can't have seen that, have you?"

She laughed at him now. "Of course I've seen it," she said, "for ages past, and so has Elsie. You must be blind if you haven't; but I believe men are all blind in those matters."

He wanted to hear more. It was incredible to him that this had been going on, and he had had no idea of it, loving Rose as he did and watching her so carefully. But Olivia convinced him. "I think *I* suspected it," she said, "when everybody else, even Elsie, thought she liked Jack Kirby. I'm sure she didn't know it herself then, though; but it was partly that that was making her unhappy. She hasn't been happy, you know, since Giles went away. Didn't you notice her when his letter came to say that he couldn't come to Elsie's wedding?"

No, Sydney had not noticed that, nor various other little signs that had been as plain as print to Olivia's sympathetic eyes. "Oh, I'm so glad that he does love her," she said happily. "I thought he must, but I couldn't be sure. Dear Mr. Conway, do you *really* think he can be telling her so now?"

"I'll risk a look back," said Sydney. "If they have fallen a long way behind——"

He looked back, but Giles and Rose were nowhere to be seen, in the long straight road between the beech woods up which they had been walking.

"They've given us the slip," said Sydney. "I think that settles it."

The news that was presently conveyed to Mrs. Conway was such a surprise to her that she was unable at first to say that she had seen it coming all along, although she did say so later to Lady Sophia, and quite believed it. Rose's happy blushing face, as she told her that she and Giles had found out that they loved one another, should have given her a great deal of

pleasure, but she was unfortunately not apt to be much affected by the happiness of her elder daughters, and her mind had to adapt itself to the material side of the question before she could have leisure to regard the sentimental. When she was told all that had been settled, she expressed a modified approval, but this attitude did not bring her enough of satisfaction, and it was finally on the sentimental side of the engagement that she concentrated herself.

"No doubt," she said to Lady Sophia, "the world will consider us demented to permit a daughter of ours to marry a man with so little, but——"

"Oh, I don't know about that," interrupted Lady Sophia. "I don't call a thousand a year, with a charming house thrown in, so very little. Lots of people better off than you, Jane, would jump at it if the man was all right; and Giles Bellamy *is* all right. I've had him under my eye for some time now, and I approve of him."

"I was just about to say that it is his character, and his deep, though unassuming love for Rose, that makes one think nothing of possibly straitened means," said Mrs. Conway. "In my mind love is everything in these matters. If Rose had married young Kirby, as at one time seemed not improbable, I doubt if I should ever have got over it. The wealth and rank he would have given her would only have been the gold framing to a picture of misery such as I should tremble to anticipate for a daughter of mine."

"Oh, well," said Lady Sophia, "as that little affair didn't come off, it's just as well to say that we didn't want it to. I don't object to young Jack myself, and

I think he'd have made quite a good husband for Rose if the minx hadn't come between them. It would have been nice to have had her at Prittlewell, too, instead of right up there in the wilds of Cumberland. Still, if she's happy, dear child! Oh, I think it's quite a good marriage for her, Jane. I was talking to Ronald Grenville up in London the other day. He knows all about art and artists. He said that Giles Bellamy was a very rising man, bound to be an Academician before long. So that's something to look forward to. I don't suppose it will begin and end with a thousand a year. No; you've done remarkably well for Elsie, and not at all badly for Rose. In fact, things seem to be looking up all round. Is Mark Drake going to do anything for Sydney, by the by? Watermeads is still the weak spot, isn't it? With Elsie and Rose settled, and Fred on his way to be Prime Minister, it's a pity you can't fix yourselves up more comfortably here."

It was true that Watermeads was still the weak spot. Sydney talked about it to Giles, who had been so closely connected with the family life that it held few secrets from him.

"Of course we've had an extraordinary amount of good fortune lately," he said. "Elsie and Rose—well, in the state to which we have been reduced, one could hardly have expected either of them to marry so well. Then there's Fred provided for—unless he gets up against Uncle Mark, as I did; but I don't think that's likely to happen. If Uncle Mark makes him his heir, then Watermeads will be all right, too. But in the meantime what's to happen?"

"It's hard luck," said Giles. "It's such a jolly place, too. You know I think it's jollier as it is now than if it were kept up like other country houses. I shall never forget last summer; Edward Probert won't either."

Sydney laughed. "You were both in love," he said. "But I enjoyed the summer, too. There's a lot to be said for a simple way of living—amongst friends. If one could live in a corner of the house, as one does, and not feel that all the rest was going downhill fast! But one can't even do that with an easy mind. I'm selling things all the time to keep us going. What *does* one do, Giles, in a case like mine? There must be plenty of other land-owners whose property doesn't support them."

"I suppose they have to sell sooner or later. Or else they let their big houses, and live in smaller ones."

"If I could do that! I really thought Vivian Probert had an idea of renting the place. He's got a fine house of his own, of course, but he's got heaps of money, and I thought he'd taken enough of a fancy to Watermeads to want it. But that possibility seems to have disappeared, like all the others. He'd have to spend thousands on putting the place into habitable repair before he began to amuse himself with it, and I suppose that frightens him off. If I could only do it myself, I believe I could get a good rent for the house. Then I would go and live at Manor Farm, and look after the place from there. I wish I could. I'm getting tired of the struggle, Giles. I love Watermeads, but I've devoted the greater part of my life to it, and it's getting too much for me. I should be glad

to let it go now—at least for my life-time. I should like to see Fred here some day, but I'm inclined to think I shan't be able to keep it for him. Well, it's on the knees of the gods. They have been holding out one hope after another during the last year, and then withdrawing them. Yet, somehow, I can't feel that I'm going to lose Watermeads altogether, after keeping it going for so long. Something will turn up. I haven't really given up hope yet."

CHAPTER XXXII

AT MANOR FARM

June had come round once more. All the lilacs and thorns and laburnums and syringas were flowering in the overgrown gardens of Watermeads, to say nothing of rhododendrons and azaleas, and the countless flowers that grew among the tall grasses of the once-trim lawns, and made them so much more beautiful, just for this month at least, than they had been in the days of their shaven pride.

But the period of neglect, however occasionally happy in its results, was coming to an end for Watermeads. The vast repairs that had become necessary to keep the house from tumbling about its owners' ears had been set in hand, and were now nearly complete; and when the structural repairs which absorbed so much money and showed on the surface so little result, should be finished, there would set in a further period of revivification, which would restore the old house to the glories of its past, and make it once more one of the rich and stately country homes of England.

For Sydney Conway had found the money to restore the fabric of his house, and Sir Vivian Probert was going to rent it, when it should be put in sufficient order to enable him to exercise his taste upon it.

A few days after Giles Bellamy had returned to Cumberland—it having been settled that his marriage

with Rose should take place at Easter—he had written to Sydney with a story that had aroused excitement at Watermeads.

It was the story of Holbein's 'Unknown Lady.' Some diligent German investigator had got on to the track of a once known picture of Holbein's—or rather on to the fact of there having been such a picture, whose whereabouts had been known until early in the eighteenth century. It had then disappeared completely. A good deal had been written about it in art magazines and papers in Germany, and several pictures had turned up claiming to be the lost masterpiece. But they had either been manifest forgeries, or had not tallied with the close description of the original which had been the investigator's discovery. Until now, the interest had been confined to Germany, but Giles had seen the first mention of it in an English periodical, and the description there given had tallied with what he remembered of the picture at Watermeads.

On the same morning as Giles's letter had been received, the expert who had recently decided against the authenticity of the Watermeads picture had paid an unheralded visit to look at it again. He had then unhesitatingly pronounced it to be genuine, and the one that was being sought for, and had offered to sell it at a high price, with a suitable commission to be paid to himself.

Others visitors, all more or less anxious to do something for themselves in the matter, had followed in quick succession, and an offer from one of them of five thousand pounds down for the picture—the purchaser

to take all risks—had nearly been accepted by Sydney. But it had occurred to him to ask if the principal for whom the agent was acting happened to be a certain Mr. Hermann Blumenthal. The agent had refused to disclose the name of his principal, but had already shown by the way he had taken the unexpected question, that the guess was probably a true one. "Then you can go back and tell Mr. Blumenthal, if it's he who wants to buy it," said Sydney, "that I wouldn't sell it him for fifty thousand. And you might ask him, too, if he happened to have heard anything about the missing picture from Germany when he saw this one last August."

By and by, however, Sydney was almost inclined to wish that he had closed with this offer, even though Mr. Blumenthal had shown himself in so mean a light about it. For controversy raged hotly over the picture, which was sent up to London to be exhibited, and there were at least as many who scoffed at the idea of its genuineness as of those who were convinced by it. If he had been able to provide any evidence as to its purchase by whatever ancestor of his had brought it to Watermeads the scoffing might have been silenced. But the most diligent research failed to produce any reference to the picture whatever. There was nothing even to show that Grandfather Frederic, who had reigned at Watermeads at about the time the picture seemed to have been last known of in Germany, had ever visited that country. But he had bought pictures elsewhere, and there was a record of some of his purchases. This cut both ways, for if he was made out to be something of a *connoisseur*, which was to

the good, why had he left nothing in writing about such a valuable find as this? Sydney's opinion, expressed only in the bosom of his family, was that it was certainly he who had brought the Holbein to Watermeads, but that he had probably acquired it dishonestly, and had been wise to say nothing about it.

Eventually the picture had been sold at auction and had fetched eight thousand pounds,—a very inadequate price if it was really the missing picture, but a very satisfactory one if it were not. Sydney was inclined to hope that evidence would turn up to show that it was not, when Mr. Blumenthal was declared to have been the ultimate purchaser.

But, at any rate, there had been the money with which Watermeads could be put into structural repair, and Manor Farm adapted for the residence of himself and his now depleted family. And directly the repairs had been set in hand, Sir Vivian Probert had offered to rent Watermeads as his second country house, and terms had been agreed upon in about the time that it had taken Mr. Blumenthal to reach his first objection in a similar negotiation.

The repairs to Watermeads were nearing completion; the adaptation of Manor Farm was already completed. Giles and Rose were staying there on their return from their honey-moon tour. Edward and Elsie had come over from Lutterbourne for the afternoon. Fred had come down for the week-end. The enlightened electors of West Russetshire had given him a majority of seventeen votes over his opponent, and he now represented them in Parliament, where he professed himself enormously busy; but his cares did not

appear to sit very heavily on him when he came down to Watermeads, which he had done almost every week during the spring. Olivia had come to tea, to see Elsie and Rose, and they were all to play tennis afterwards, quite in the happy way of the previous summer, but on the newly laid court at Manor Farm instead of at Watermeads. The only absentees of the family were Bobby and Billy, now blissfully happy in their first summer term at Charterhouse, whence they wrote home weekly letters exuding cricket at every pore.

Manor Farm was as pretty a country house of its size as could be found anywhere. It was stone-built and stone-roofed, and nestled amongst its trees in a setting of garden and orchard, busy steading, mellow barns and outbuildings, deep-grassed meadows, with the river running its placid course not far away—a very haunt of country peace and contentment. Its fifteenth century timbered hall, running up to the roof, had been restored, and made as pleasant a family meeting place as the great hall at Watermeads. Round it clustered an irregular series of rooms, some large and some small, which gave as much accommodation as the family which now so happily occupied it could want. There were spacious 'offices' besides, in which Cooky had found herself a new home almost as much to her taste as the last, though she had not yet been brought to acknowledge it. Alice remained as housemaid, and there was a parlour-maid besides. There was a groom-gardener, and a boy to help him in his dual occupation; and there were horses in the stables, and not only farm horses.

"Do you remember, mother," said Sydney, over tea in the hall, "that about this time last year we were waiting for a telegram from Fred to tell us what Grandfather John had fetched at Christie's? We were full of hope, of course—we always were in those days—but I don't believe any of us could have expected to be so happy in a year's time as we all are now. We've really been extraordinarily lucky. But what a lot has happened since then, eh?"

Mrs. Conway breathed deeply. She had gained at least as much from the changes that had taken place as her husband. She had enough money and enough servants to relieve her of all necessity for domestic contrivance; she could entertain her friends whenever she wished to, and she had her carriage once more, in which she could visit them in turn. All the limitations, in fact, under which she had laboured for so many years had been removed; but so had the grievances which had added salt to her life and point to her tirades. She had taken refuge in a sombre reserve, big with the sense of irretrievable loss, but was gradually finding expression for this attitude, and in quite a short time might be expected to have as much to say about the unaccountable behaviour of those about her in making themselves happy under the bereavement as when she had raised her voice in protest under the heavy burden of existence at Watermeads.

"If you are referring to Elsie and Rose, Sydney," she said, "I am quite aware that the past year has brought them as much happiness as young wives are entitled to before they can have had experience of the sadder side of life. I myself, as a young wife, was

completely—I might almost say blissfully—happy, and I certainly should not wish it otherwise for my daughters. If the past year had done no more for us than to bring Edward and Giles into the family, I should indeed say that we had reason to congratulate ourselves."

"The Reverend Edward Probert will return suitable thanks," said Sydney, "which will be seconded by Mr. Giles Bellamy."

Mrs. Conway closed her eyes and opened them again. "I am fully aware also," she continued, "that Fred has, to use a vulgar expression, fallen on his feet, and Bobby and Billy are being well educated, which is all to the good, though I could wish that their letters contained more references to lessons and were not always full of this eternal playing at cricket."

"Well, that only leaves you and me and Mother Bunch," said Sydney, "and I don't think any of us three has much to complain of. You're a happy person now, aren't you, Mother Bunch? No complaints to make of life, eh?"

"I like living here better than at Watermeads," said Penelope. "So does Cooky, though she pretends she doesn't. But I should like to have a pony."

"Well, if you're a good girl you shall have a pony. Thank goodness one can manage these little affairs now. I don't suppose you'd care about a pony, mother, but if there's anything else that would make life pleasant for you in a small way we'll see if we can't manage to let you have it."

"Think well, mother," said Elsie. "There are lots

of things I should ask for if such an offer were made to me."

"Thank you, Elsie," said Mrs. Conway, "but I am not in need of such advice. When you reach my age, and have been through all that I have—although I hope and pray that that may never happen to you—you will not perhaps be so inclined to pin your happiness to toys. I want nothing, Sydney, I thank you. I have a roof over my head, food to eat, and a bed to sleep in; there are countless thousands who are not so well off as I am. I am content, and more than content."

"Oh, well, that's good hearing, mother," said Sydney. "Then you and I are in the same boat, because I'm more than content, too. In fact, I haven't been so happy as I am now for years and years. Come along, children, and let's get to work. Fred and I put up the wire this morning, and we shan't have to do quite so much ball-hunting as last time."

They went out, through the paved garden in front of the house, round by the old orchard and down to where a lawn had been levelled by the river. Sydney walked with the step of a young man again. He was, in fact, supremely happy. The lovely June weather, the beauty of his surroundings, the society of those whom he loved or liked, the pleasure of his game—he could enjoy it all now that the weight of care which had hitherto clogged his life was removed. The way was clear right ahead of him. He wanted nothing more than he had, or would have, till the end of his life.

Mrs. Conway, left alone with Penelope, as she had

been on that first summer afternoon when we first made her acquaintance, sighed heavily.

"What's the matter, mother?" asked the sharp-eyed child. "Why does Dad enjoy himself so much and you don't enjoy yourself?"

Mrs. Conway sighed again. "When you grow older, darling," she said "you will find out that some people have light natures, and nothing makes much impression on them, while other people have—have——"

"Have heavy natures, I suppose," Penelope helped her out. "Yes, I've found that out already. I had a heavy nature myself about Freda; but I've got over it now. I thought we had treated Freda rather badly, but now I think she treated us rather badly. So I don't worry about her any more. If I were you, mother, I should give up grumbling. I'm sure you have plenty to make you happy."

Penelope made a sudden exit, and went down through the orchard to join the others. Mrs. Conway was stricken to the heart by her speech. Her own dearly loved child had turned against her, following in the footsteps of the rest, on whom she had expended an infinity of attention and maternal love, with such painful and unaccountable results. If Penelope could speak to her like that, what a dreadful and sinister light it threw upon the influence to which the poor child was subjected! Oh, that light and shallow nature, to which she had entrusted her own happiness years before, what mischief it could work, perhaps—for she must be fair—without meaning to work mischief! Well, she had made her own choice long ago,

and must go through with it unto the end. But one thing she would not have. She had seen her elder children led away, until a mother's love and a mother's authority alike had been meaningless to them. She would not allow her youngest to be drawn away along the same path. She would act before it was too late. Much as she would miss the child, Penelope must be sent to boarding-school.

Having made this decision, and prepared a few heads of the discourse she would presently deliver to her husband on the subject—which would bring him to a right view of the situation he had created, if anything could—Mrs. Conway put on her gardening apron and went out to tend the flowers in the paved garden in front of the house. She had taken to gardening with some zest since settling at Manor Farm, and, if the truth must be told, thoroughly enjoyed spending money on it, to an extent that would have shocked her a few weeks earlier. When she had busied herself for some time with her trowel and scissors and watering pot, she suddenly realised, as she stood up and straightened her broad back, that she was enjoying herself excessively. There were no troublesome accounts to take her indoors, and set her wondering how she should ever square them; there were no worries waiting her whatever. She could enjoy her pottering with a clear mind, and for as long as she wished. And afterwards she could go in and read a novel, by Edna Lyall, until it was time to dress for dinner. She gained at that moment some slight insight into the new freedom of mind which was so happily affecting the spirits of her husband. But she was

not made to accept contentment. With a shake of the head she corrected her impulse towards sympathy with him. He must always remain her cross; but she would do her duty, and bear with him to the end.

After they had played a set, and sat for a time watching another one, Fred and Olivia strolled off along the river bank, and presently found themselves in the wilder parts of the Watermeads gardens, where the ground, carpeted with the skiey blue of wild hyacinths, rose and fell between profusely flowering shrubs and groups of tall-springing trees.

They had become the closest friends, these two, since that parting at the gate of the Vicarage, where Olivia had given Fred the warning that had so soon proved itself to have been justified. It was long since that little disturbance had been cleared away between them. She had shown herself so kind and sympathetic over Fred's trouble, when it had lain heavy upon him, and he had seen, when once he had begun to throw off his trouble, what affection and loyalty had prompted her difficult speech to him. As Freda's image had faded from his mind, Olivia's filled it more and more. Just that sense of rest and security, which had always evaded him in Freda, were to be found in Olivia, however she might be tested. And her beauty, to which he presently seemed to himself to have been strangely blind, grew and grew upon him, until he came to think of her with the tenderest admiration.

He kept these feelings, when they became strong, almost shamefacedly to himself. It would be offering her a love as light as he saw his love for Freda to have

been to make them apparent to her. She must be shocked by them, and he could hardly hope that they would be returned, so short a time after he had made her the confidante of his sore and stricken heart. He felt debased by the memory of his love for Freda. Olivia had helped to heal that wound, but it was too recent for her to have forgotten it.

But still his love for her grew and would not be denied. He thought of her constantly in the midst of his busy life, and the thought of her was a pure refreshment. The few weeks in which he was not able to spend a day or two at Watermeads so that he might see her were dull and blank to him. Presently he made up his mind to put his fortune to the test, but diffidence in her presence held him back, and for week after week he returned to London, loving her increasingly, but still ignorant of whether her feeling for him contained any love.

They had been talking, in the most friendly intimacy, of the new life that had begun at Watermeads. They were in entire agreement about it. The years of struggle that had come to an end had been happy years for those who had grown up in them. "I suppose," Fred had said, "that I've already had more fun out of Watermeads than ever father had. I don't believe I shall enjoy it more than I have already if it ever comes to be mine in such a way that I can live in it—well, as the Proberts are going to."

"It's the place one loves," said Olivia. "I love it, too, you know, Fred. It isn't the house so much; or at least it certainly isn't the way of living that the house seems to demand. Dear Mr. Conway found that

out long ago; and that's why he's happy in having given up the house, for a time. He keeps all the rest that he loves—that all of us love."

Fred smiled at her. "You've grown up to it all just as we have," he said. "I believe you do love Watermeads just as much as we do."

"Yes, I do," she said simply. "I didn't know, till I came back to it, how much I loved it. I feel as if I never want to leave it again."

The impulse came to him to ask her now, and his heart leapt into his throat at the audacity of the thought. He looked away, and said in a matter-of-fact voice, which, however, shook as he spoke: "I wish you'd say you never will leave it, dear Olivia. It has always been the chief place in the world to me, but I know now that it will be nothing to me without you."

She did not reply, and he summoned up his courage to go on. "You know all about me," he said, "and what I was thinking of last summer. I'm ashamed of that now—but if you forgive it!" He had meant to say more, but came to an abrupt end.

They walked a few paces, and he stole a look at her face. She was blushing deeply, and the tears stood in her eyes. But as he looked at her she looked at him, and then he knew that there was no question of forgiveness between them, but only the question of love. And that question was already answered.

THE END

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
A 000 169 721 8